ERIK WEIR

The COFFIN HOTEL

Knightmare

The Coffin Hotel

Knightmare

Book 2

Erik Weir

The Coffin Hotel: Knightmare: Book 2

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Editing

Lucid Dream Editing

“I’m gonna own this curse… and I’m gonna use it against you. Whenever innocent blood is spilt, it’ll be my father’s blood… and you’ll find me there. A Spirit of Vengeance… fighting fire with fire.”

~Johnny Blaze

Coffin Hotel: Knightmare, is Book 2 in the series.

You may find Book 1 here.

Thank you for reading!

The Coffin Hotel
Knightmare

Zero
A Certain Point of View

I could feel the sun touch the horizon in the vast distance. It wasn't so much an ability. It was more like my internal clock knew the day was ending and I had to get up soon.

I was still dreaming and gently rising to the waking world. I would soon take control of my body and carry on with my life. Until that moment when I opened my eyes, I swam in black waters as dark figures with tentacles stood in the vast distance. I often tried to swim to them, but they always remained just out of reach. It was their way, really. They remained mysterious beacons of ethereal darkness. They whispered to my soul, but never spoke in a way I could understand. They were ancient, powerful, and filled with forbidden knowledge. How I envied them.

The closer I floated to my body, the more the whispers grew. I couldn't remember when they were so loud. Their alien voices turned into a storm. Their incoherent words stabbed at my psyche. I welcomed them in, but they remained at a distance.

When my eyes fluttered, a voice touched my soul.

A taste of death.

My eyes opened and I stared up at the ceiling. My heart was racing. I took in a quick breath and sat up. I looked around to take in my surroundings. I was home. Paintings hung on the walls of my bedroom. A shelf filled with books from all over the world stood across from my bed. My desk was neat and in order. The air had a new scent and I wondered if last night's sacrifice was already rotting away.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed and stood up. My mind was abuzz with the whisper. The words clung to my soul. From my readings and research, it was another piece of the puzzle and I was close to achieving my goal.

I glanced at the window and saw that the sun was setting. I had about an hour before true night would fall. It didn't matter though. My time was coming, and I could shed this life for a darker one.

I looked down at my night table. A picture of a loving family stood. I smirked, knowing the picture came with the frame. When I had people over, they saw the many pictures around my normal apartment and I often said they were relatives and their families. It was enough for people to smile politely and accept me as a normal person. I never cared to tell anyone the truth. They didn't need to know, and I didn't care to go further in depth. It was a façade, something to appear as normal as possible for as long as I could.

The end was coming, and I was ready for a new beginning.

I stood up with new energy and excitement along my spirit. I rushed to my dresser and pulled out my clothes. I quickly dressed and fixed my collar in the mirror. I was even humming, which was something I never did before.

When I was finished, I took another sniff at the air and caught the scent of decay.

I glanced at my bookshelf as dark knowledge crawled over my mind. I turned and walked to the bookshelf. I grabbed at the side and lifted a hidden metal hook. The shelf silently parted from the wall and opened to a locked door. I pulled a rune covered key from my pocket and inserted it into the keyhole. With a twist, the lock clicked and the door opened.

A memory touched my thoughts as I opened the door. Images played out of whispers, shadows, madness, and secrets. The apartment spoke to me when I first looked at it. The whispers were there, leading me along. I knew I had to have this place. After the papers were signed and the key handed over, I moved in the next

day. I spent most of the day, not unpacking, but searching every nook and cranny of the apartment. The shelf was already here, against the wall. When my fingers unlatched the hook, the shelf moved. When I saw the door, I ran my fingers along the doorframe and touched the key.

My heart was beating fast, just like it was now, inserting the key and opening the door.

I stepped into the dark room and touched a light switch. A dim bulb glowed to life in the small alcove of a room. It wasn't big and only contained one item. I stared at the stone altar within. A cloaked figure stood. It looked exactly as it had when I first found it. Runes were carved into the base of the black stone. The cloaked figure was motionless, but under the edges of their cloak, tentacles snaked out.

I stared at the small statue. It took me years to decipher some of the words and understand their meaning. I had a good grasp on it, but for each letter or phrase I learned, it felt like my soul and mind grew a little lighter. There were moments where an existential dread in my soul turned into an existential enlightenment. Despite learning some of the words, there was one word at the base of the statue that I could clearly read.

Draygon

The name was enough to pull me deeper into things I only saw in dreams. It spoke to my soul, and I allowed it to plant a seed within me.

I looked down at the floor before the statue. Three dead cats lay in a circle. Their throats were cut and each one stared at nothing. A memory of painting their blood on the runes along the base of the statue filled my mind. It was natural, bloody, and fulfilling.

"If I come back, I'll clean you three up," I said to the dead cats.

I lifted my gaze to the small statue. "I heard your whispers. I welcome your test and dark blessing."

I bowed to the statue before standing up and leaving the secret room. I closed the door and locked it. I was about to lock the shelf back in place when a thought struck me. If I don't return, others may find my little hidden room. Better to be safe than sorry. I fished out the key and placed it on the doorframe. I made sure it was secure before I pushed the shelf back into place and heard the metal hook catch.

I moved to the front door of my apartment. I grabbed my coat off the peg by the door and quickly exited my home, perhaps for the last time.

I hummed during the entire drive to work. When I parked, I looked out my window to the Seven Twelve sign glowing in the now night sky. The sun had just set, and a frigid cold swamped this little speck of the world.

I stepped out of my car and made my way to work.

After I changed and punched the clock, I moved through the store and took my place behind the counter. I was smiling as I knew something was going to happen and my dark dreams could be coming true.

Living in a world where the supernatural and superheroes exist can change how you look at life. Where most of the populace feared the night or the terror of a super villain, there were those of us who treasured it. It was a magical time to be alive, knowing gods, monsters, and heroes walked among us, in one way or another. I knew, deep down, I was meant for more. I knew I was different. I knew I had a destiny I had to realize. Finding the statue in my apartment was the first step, a doorway to greater things. I only had to follow the path so I could cross over to greater dreams. I could be more than a broken soul in an uncaring, unforgiving world.

An hour into my shift, the excitement began to wane. I leaned against the back counter, arms crossed and my mind drifting. A moment of doubt touched the edges of my mind, but I quickly

pushed it away. Faith was important and I had placed my faith with the deity I had chosen.

The fluorescent lights flickered overhead. The odd, packaged smells wafted into my nose. I calmed my heart down, knowing that fate could happen at any time or any place.

The front door opened and a man with a hooded jacket stepped in. I glanced up to see the customer's eyes move side to side. He looked suspicious and part of me wondered if this was it? Was this my moment of fate?

I moved my hand to the small shelf under the counter, the silver revolver within reach. The mart was robbed a few times a year. I shot a robber dead the first time I started working here. It felt good to see his soul leave his body as he bled over the linoleum tiled floor. I wonder if I will get another chance tonight.

The guy in the black hood moved about the shelves. He continued to glance around. There was an intention in his eyes, and he couldn't hide it. It felt more and more like I would get a chance to take a life in feigned self-defense. My dark lord would be proud as I killed in their name.

The front door opened again.

I glanced over to see the burrito weirdo step in. I didn't know his name. All I knew about him was how happy he was to buy a few of our vomit-inducing burritos. I wouldn't eat those things, or even feed them to animals. Sure, I was a killer and loyal servant to a dark lord, but even I had standards. Poisoning and manipulating a mind is fine, but a slow poisoning of the body was needlessly long and complicated. It was so slow; you couldn't taste the suffering. It was barbaric and I preferred a more refined approach to corruption and evil.

The microwave turned on as the burrito weirdo stared at it, his back to me and the store.

I looked over at the guy with the black hood. He looked nervous. His eyes twitched. I guessed he didn't expect anyone else here. It must have changed his plans because he walked up the aisle and pulled out his own revolver. He lifted it up and pointed the barrel at me, a madness in his eyes.

This was the moment. This was the taste of death whispered to me, but was it my death, or his?

"Empty it out!" the guy in the black hood gestured to the register.

Madness consumed me.

"Please, please! I'll give you what you want! Just don't hurt me!" I pleaded so I could buy time.

"Put the fucking money in the bag!" the hoodie guy shouted.

"Please, I have a family," I begged as the register dinged open.

I didn't have any close family. I was only playing the part I have always played to disarm people. Even crooks had a natural sympathy that could be used and manipulated. I only needed him to lower his guard enough for me to pull my revolver and shoot him, a sacrifice to my dark god.

"I don't give a shit about your family! Give me the cash!" the man with the hood shouted.

Madness ate away at me as I pretended to be weak and spineless. Little did the robber know, a deep hatred was growing deeper at that very moment, wanting to wipe the world away of the trash, ignorant, and ridiculous beings called people. They deserved to be enslaved and on their knees. It has always been the natural order of the universe. Only the strong, intelligent, and clever were allowed to rule. Not this poor excuse of a person, pointing a gun at me just so he could steal some money. The robber's hand shook, holding a weapon that was meant for a warrior. I was ready to wager with my life, the robber didn't have the fortitude of spirit to pull the trigger.

My spirit blazed hot. I let my attitude flair so I could cow down this cretin, long enough for me to grab my gun, pull the trigger, and sacrifice his soul to my dark god. It would be perfect; everything seen on camera would clear my name as I fed another soul to the dark void.

“I have…” I began.

I reached down to grab cash when my hand slipped down onto the gun. I pulled up the revolver as the robber’s eyes widened in disbelief.

“I have a gun, motherfucker!” I shouted with mad glee.

Time slowed down as I watched the robber’s finger jerk back in fear. There was a flash and a deafening bang. I felt the bullet hit me as I pulled the trigger to my revolver. The guy in the hood jerked as my bullet hit him, but another of his bullets hit me. I felt my body jerk as the smell of cordite touched the air between us.

My finger was pulling back on the trigger, ready to empty my gun when the robber stumbled back and pulled his trigger again. I saw the bullet right before it struck my eye. I felt it bore through my head as my mind shattered into jagged shards. The light of my soul wavered before it snapped free from my falling form.

I drifted in the dark, the last tendrils of life slipping away. I tasted death and I smiled.

A cloaked figure stepped through the darkness. Tentacles writhed under their cloak as they lifted a pale hand. I felt their fingers surround me and I let out a silent shout of joy.

I passed the test. I was now a loyal warrior for the dark legions.

I was free.

One

Dead and Loving it Part Time

The silence was killing me.

I could feel my eyes slowly blink as I stared at a blank wall across the lobby foyer. My elbows were on the main desk and my chin resting in an open palm. Time ticked away like a snail writing a check to pay child support. He didn't want to do it, but he had to do it, pretty much like me, here at the desk, waiting for something to happen.

Sunlight filtered in from the windows. The bright yellow shafts of light were slowly turning a pale orange as the sun touched the horizon. It gave a comforting glow to the end of the day, but that brought me little comfort. Nighttime was the busy time. The hotel tended to be a little more active in the evening, which was fine by me. I needed to do something to chase away the boredom and dreaded peace that filled the hotel.

I suppose I should get this over with before I must get back to work. Recaps are informative, but annoying. Trying to remember all the details is like walking to the kitchen for a midnight snack. You're hungry, tired, and you don't want to turn on the lights because it will wake you up. You stumble through the dark, smash your pinky toe a few times on furniture that moves in your way, get blinded by the fridge light, and eat a small stack of cheese like the feral goblin you always knew you were. It's not pretty, but it must be done.

I died in a dirty parking lot of a Seven Twelve Corner Mart. I then woke up on a strange road with a twenty-foot-tall pumpkin-headed god who chose me to run a special hotel and serve justice to those who would hurt or kill the innocent. I know, blah blah, boring. And before you ask, no, the job doesn't have medical.

To say I was a little insane after my death is a slight understatement. It took some time to pull my mind together as I was getting used to my new role as hotel manager for the Coffin Hotel.

I was informed that I was now a witch angel. We are the chosen soldiers of the god of Autumn, Death, and Justice: Samhain. We have increased strength, speed, agility, and sweet new powers. I met Nyx, a smoking hot witch angel who had an instant crush on me. I had one on her too, but if you read the first book, you know all about it.

There was some business with fixing the hotel up and taking in a few people and guests. Mara Green is the hotel's chef. She is also a zombie that has kept her mind. She acts like a normal person, but if she goes too long without raw meat, she gets a little feral. It's kind of cute when she is trying to bite your face off, but we all manage our friendships the best we can. I should mention she has green skin and is a hell of a cook.

Lydia Raven is my head of security. She likes to wear black. She has a trench-coat with enough weapons inside it to annex a small country. She is what is called, a revenant. It's nearly impossible to kill her and the only way she can move on is by killing the person who killed her. She is a spirit of vengeance and can have an attitude at times. I completely understand, as I too, am dead and loving it part time. The other part is just weird.

We have a few long-term guests here at the hotel. Vanessa Ode is staying at the hotel. It would seem she is what is called a Ban-Sidhe, or banshee. She's a little shy and keeps to herself. I've caught her a few times killing small animals and feeding on their death energy. From what she told me, that is how they feed. Considering how many strange things and people that have passed through the hotel, she isn't the weirdest guest.

Another guest is Sick. No, he's not sick, his name is Sick. He is a supernatural superhero from Spiral City. Spiral City has superheroes and supervillains. They often stay in the mega-city, but sometimes they come out to handle other threats across Urth. Sick on the other

hand, came to the hotel to stay and relax for a few months. Fighting supernatural threats is exhausting and the green zombie man likes to take it easy. I won't go in depth about the celebrity crush I have for him. It's not every night you meet a superhero, and they stay at your hotel.

There were some other things that happened over a week ago. A demon bachelorette party, a mystical tentacle nerd convention, a witch angel who tried to end the world, oh, and some horrific monster known as a Grimm tried to invade the hotel and infect the nexus point underneath it.

Yeah, I should explain some of that. You see, on Urth, there are nexus points across the globe. They are points of energy and sometimes can connect to other realms. Urth is one realm of dozens that intersect. Samhain, and us, the witch angels, are charged with protecting as many nexus points as possible. Monsters, other worldly beings, and fucking assholes are all trying to occupy nexus points. Some of them want to use it to travel freely between realms to spread evil. Others are drawn to them so they can try and absorb their power. And there are those who just want to mess with the celestial balance, tipping it further to chaos.

There are good guys and gals too. Many heroes and super beings are trying to protect nexus points to maintain the balance. From what I was told, the conflict shifts all the time. Sometimes the bad guys win. Sometimes the good guys win. Either way, it shifts fate, or something like that. I tend to blank out when anyone is telling me anything that may be useful or important.

My job at the hotel is simple. Take care of the guests, run the hotel, help spirits move on to the afterlife, fight monsters, and protect the innocent.

Nyx, a smoking hot witch angel, is my partner here at the hotel. She's been a witch angel for close to eighty years, but still looks fine enough to cause me to lose my train of thought when she enters a room.

Did I mention the hotel is alive? Well, sort of alive. It has a heart in the sub-basement level. It's not a gross living heart, but a ball of light connected with vines to walls. The hotel was abandoned years ago, and she slowly went back to sleep. When I arrived and began feeding her soul pennies, she woke up and began healing the hotel.

What are soul pennies? When a being with a soul dies, they awake as a spirit or ghost. They often have a few to many soul pennies in their pocket, depending on how they lived. The pennies are used to book passage to nexus points or special places across realms. Once they pass beyond, depending on the life they lived, they may use the soul pennies to help guide their path to their next life. They enter something called the Soul Wheel before reincarnating to another realm. If you lead a life of kindness, peace, and spiritual fulfillment, you may die with a pocket filled with soul pennies and can decide how you want to return to the land of the living. If you lead a life of inflicting pain, suffering, and just being an asshole, you won't have many pennies and chances are, you will have no choice on what you come back as. From what I've been told, assholes come back as bugs most of the time. It was a weird way to learn that bugs have souls too.

I know these are broad strokes, but you should be caught up. Let's get back to me loafing on the job.

I stood up straight, lifted my arms in the air and gave a yawn loud enough to wake the dead. When my arms came down, they slapped at my thighs so I could wake up. I shook my head and hopped a little behind the main desk. I shook my hands at my sides. I had no idea if it would help, but considering how tired I was, anything would help.

The dying sunlight continued to paint the walls. When the last ray vanished from the sky, there was a small, bright flash before night slipped in with a silky dress and a glass of wine in her hand.

Damn, I really wanted a drink.

The front door opened, and I put on my best smile. My smile crinkled as a robed figure with a pumpkin head stepped in.

Samhain turned his jack-0-lantern features to me and gave me a wide, demonic smile.

“Brandon Ferryman, good to see you at your post,” the god said as he stepped closer to the main desk.

I was taken aback. I’ve only interacted with the god twice and each time he was over twenty feet tall. He still looked the same for the most part. He was wearing his black robe. His hands were like thick, moving tree branches. His eyes, triangular nose, and demonic smile glowed, but I didn’t see a candle in his head. The only thing different was that he was about seven-feet-tall and seemed to be in a good mood.

“Hi boss,” I smiled. “What brings you by?”

Samhain turned his head from left to right. He then looked up, inspecting the walls before his gaze centered on me.

“I came to see how the hotel was faring and to see you. It seems the place has greatly improved from the last time I was here.”

I nodded. “We’ve been getting regular guests. The word is out that the hotel is open for business. The soul pennies have been helping with repairs.”

Samhain nodded. “The article in the Spirit Tribune also helped. I liked how they retracted their previous article about you and the hotel and gave a new one with glowing reviews. The work you and Nyx did to stop the Grimm and Hilda was well done. You both saved a lot of lives and earned your rest.”

Rest? Everything that happened with Hilda and the Grimm was over two weeks ago? I was working the whole time, taking care of the hotel and guests. You mean I could have sat on my ass and did nothing for two weeks? If I didn’t know any better, I would swear Samhain had upper management training on how to make people work when they didn’t have to.

Samhain continued to leer as he towered over me and the desk. “But break time's over. I have special assignment for you and Nyx.”

“Assignment? Sounds serious,” I smiled.

Samhain nodded. “It is serious, but I believe you and Nyx can handle it.”

A strange feeling washed over me. It was hard to describe as I felt like I was moving slower. The air turned into rippling waves as Samhain stood before me. A vibration pulsed slowly as I found it hard to move. My attention was forced on the god as he leaned over the counter and stared at me with his glowing, yellow eyes.

“I have slowed down time, so prying eyes and ears may be kept at bay. I can sense Nyx and a few other beings coming to you, but I need your undivided attention now.”

“Why…is…everything…so…slow,” I asked in slow motion, the words already leaving my mouth as Samhain explained. I couldn’t stop myself if I tried.

Samhain continued as if he didn’t hear me, “I know you’re only a few weeks dead, but I did unlock your upper tier abilities on the dead tree of power. That should give you enough power to ensure what needs to transpire over the coming weeks.”

I always hated calling it the “dead tree of power.” If I wasn’t moving in slow motion, I would tell Samhain he should change it, so it didn’t sound so dumb.

The god continued, “I am unsure how much you know of the celestial politics happening across the realms. As a deity, there is a strict code divine beings must follow to allow order and chaos to flourish, but this code does not extend to followers and soldiers for different deities.

“There is a dark god that has been sticking his nose across many different realms. He enjoys chaos and madness a little too much, but that is not why I am speaking with you. Three of his followers are defecting to our side. Normally, I would have them

taken prisoner, but to show their good faith, they have acquired a rare item to barter their freedom from the dark god.

“They have been told to come here for sanctuary. If they arrive, you are to give them protection and lodgings. Here they will stay, until the Sisterhood arrives. We cannot take possession of the item because of its corruptive and alluring power. A deal was struck with the Sisterhood to take possession of the artifact and keep it in their vaults.

“Once the artifact is in their possession, the defectors will be taken to another realm so they may further prove they have shed all ties to their dark god.”

“How…” I began.

“You will know them when you see them,” Samhain stated plainly.

“What…” I said in slow motion.

“If I told you what the artifact is, others may find out and try to steal it for themselves. No, my witch angel, I cannot tell you at this time. When the defectors arrive, they can give you the history of the artifact.

“I cannot stress this enough, do not touch or put it on.”

“Do I…” the words coming out like molasses.

“The Sisterhood has already sent an envoy. They should arrive in a few nights to guide you through the steps of the transaction.”

“Hil…” my lips moved extra slow.

Samhain smiled. “Hilda is doing fine. She is in a place far away and is being tended to by top witch angels. She will be greatly cared for, and I hope to have her return to active duty when she’s better.”

“How…” the words crawled into the air at a painfully slow pace.

Samhain shook his monstrous pumpkin head. “I’m not going to give you a job performance rating at this time. You can be very

trying, Mr. Ferryman.”

Samhain lifted a gnarly hand and snapped his fingers.

Time snapped back into place so hard, it felt like my senses had whiplash. I had to stand still and blink as my eyes and throat felt dry, like I was trying to speak in a windstorm.

Samhain stood to his full seven-foot-tall height and looked down on me with his burning yellow eyes.

“I hate to be this stern, but I must indicate how important this assignment is. Do your assignment well and you will be rewarded. If you do not, years will be added to your contract to give you time to make up for your failure,” the god said darkly.

My eyes widened. “Extra years? I thought my contract was only for two hundred and ninety-nine years? I didn’t know you could add time?”

Samhain nodded once. “It’s in the fine print. It’s a way to ensure you’re doing what’s right. It’s standard across all contracts.”

“You never showed me a contract to sign,” I said with a hard edge.

“You never asked. You simply agreed. Verbal signature is just as good as written one.”

I could feel the vein in my forehead begin to throb, which was weird because I was dead, and blood didn’t always flow.

Samhain’s features softened. “Do not fret, Mr. Ferryman. Years are never added over small or medium sized mistakes. They are added if you botch something big, or knowingly aid agents of chaos.

“Follow my commands and you will be fine.”

“Small comforts,” I said and didn’t care if he heard it.

Samhain turned from me and walked toward the front doors.

“The hotel looks nice. Keep up the good work. Maybe add some new rooms for the guests, and yourself,” the pumpkin-headed god

said over his shoulder before opening the front door.

I watched him step out and close the door behind him. My mind was a storm of questions and annoyed thoughts. He probably does that with all the recently deceased to make sure he has enough people working for him. How dare he take advantage of the fact I wasn't paying attention!

For a split second, I was going to go after my boss and give him a piece of my mind, when I sensed a figure at the top of the stairs. I turned my gaze up and my spirit relaxed.

Nyx was coming down the stairs. She had a warm smile across her lips and her gaze was purely on me. She was wearing her uniform, a black bikini top and bottom with thigh high boots. She had a bent witch's hat on her head as her dark blonde, black, and purple streaked hair framed her perfect features. My gaze fell to her chest, seeing the smiling jack-o-lantern faces, one over each breast, bounce as she made her way down. I never knew why she dressed that way, but I never brought it up in case she decided to change it to something a little more conservative.

"Was the boss just here? I thought I felt him," Nyx said as she was halfway down the stairs.

I was about to answer when Mara came out from the hallway on the main floor. She had wide eyes as she rushed to the counter and slammed her hands down on the fine, polished dark wood.

"Brandon, we have a problem," Mara stated.

"That's why I'm here, to solve problems," I smirked.

Mara ignored me and continued as Nyx stepped onto the main floor.

"Our supplies are very low and when I called to order more, they told me that we hadn't paid for the first shipment! They said they will resume shipments after they are paid."

Shit. When I first arrived at the hotel, I placed orders left and right, but didn't bother to follow up with payment. Of course, they

would get mad and withhold our deliveries. If I didn't make sure everyone was well fed, I could have a riot across the hotel. Not on my watch, which I shouldn't be saying because it totally happened on my watch.

Nyx moved to Mara's side and looked at the dead girl with understanding eyes. "I'm sure we can send payment and they will resume deliveries."

Mara shook her head. "They told me, since there is a new manager for the hotel, they needed to meet them, with payment in full. After they meet Brandon and take payment, they will resume deliveries."

Mara looked me in the eyes with an edge of panic. "I have enough in our fridge to feed everyone tonight, but nothing for the morning. If guests don't have breakfast, they're going to turn into monsters."

"Mara, isn't that a little dramatic? No one gets out of control if they skip a meal."

The green zombie girl ground her teeth. "You don't understand, there is a group of wraiths staying here. If they don't have regular meals, they will start screeching and attacking anything living."

I lifted an eyebrow when I heard Mara's stomach make a swirling gurgle.

Mara looked down. "And I haven't eaten in a day because we are low on raw meat. I think I can keep it together until morning, but I don't want to join the wraiths on attacking the few living guests we have."

Shit.

I took a cleansing breath and smiled. "It looks like we're going into town for a supply run. Nyx, care to join me?"

Nyx smiled. "Sure thing. Someone has to keep you out of trouble," the beautiful witch angel winked.

Two

Shop smart, Shop at the Night Mart

Cold night air washed over my face as I exited the hotel. I stepped out onto the small set of stairs and made my way down each step, following Nyx. The beautiful witch angel swung her hips, making sure I paid attention to her perfect behind. She knew full well what she was doing and, as usual, I wanted to lick her leg like some lovesick freak.

When we stepped onto the half-circle driveway, a small sliver of clarity pulled me from Nyx's feminine wiles, and I blinked.

"Um, where is the supply place?" I asked as stars shined high in the night sky.

Nyx turned around and rested her arms on my shoulders. She gave me an innocent, but seductive look as her lips parted.

"Shroud Point is the nearest town to the hotel, and it has a Night Market."

"Night Market?" I said as I scratched my head. "Aren't most night markets filled with cheap art, designer beers, and artisan foods that hurt the wallet?"

Nyx's smile grew a little wider. "Most night markets are like that, but the one we are going to is very different. There are small pockets across Urth that contain a lot of spirit energy. They spring up most of the time, not far from nexus points. They attract all kinds of paranormal and supernatural creatures."

Nyx leaned in a little closer, her lips inches from mine. "Like all of us, even spirits and monsters must earn a living. Night markets are places for the dead and monsters to peddle their wares for a few extra soul pennies.

"If a night market is stable enough, a business may form there. We are going to Phantom Supplies to sort this out and get our

deliveries back on track. After that, maybe I'll show you around," Nyx winked.

I smiled and nodded. "Sounds fun, but how are we getting there? Should I phone a car?"

Nyx let out a girlish giggle and kissed me on the cheek. She pulled her arms away and stepped backwards a few paces.

"Car? Didn't the boss upgrade your powers?"

Before I could say anything, Nyx lifted a hand and snapped her fingers. Blue flames touched the edge of my gaze and I looked to the side. My eyes widened as I watched a skeletal horse with a saddle emerge from the ring of blue flames. The skeletal steed rose from the ground, kicking its front legs before slamming its hooves down on the grass and dirt. The blue flames died, and the skeleton horse trotted to Nyx's side.

Nyx lifted her hand and ran it along the steed's boney neck. "I know, it's been a while."

The skeleton horse bowed its head as small, blue flames danced in its eye sockets.

"We can summon skeletal horses?" I said out loud.

Nyx nodded as she looked over to me. "You haven't been practicing your new powers, have you?"

I gave her a sheepish smile. "The hotel has kept me busy."

The witch angel let out a soft giggle. "So busy that you have been standing at the front desk and staring at nothing for hours at a time?"

"It's hard work manning the desk," I lied.

Nyx threw her head back and let out a warm laugh. "Maybe I've kept you too busy at night. We might have to change our schedule to fit in more training."

"More training," I moaned and kicked a rock into the grass.

Nyx patted the skeleton horse's neck as she looked at me with amused eyes. "More training means extra rewards, in bed."

I felt my brow hardened. "Don't toy with me, woman."

Nyx looked away with glowing orange eyes. "We can talk about it over drinks. For now, call up your list of powers from the Dead Tree of Power."

I ground my teeth as I heard that stupid name. I lifted a hand and pointed at the air. Blue flames emerged out of nowhere and began forming a list of words.

Dead Tree of Power

Lower Trunk
Ghost Fire
Spirit Sense
Unstable Overload
Life Touch

Higher Trunk
Stable Overload
Cold Flame Aura
Spirit Flight
Spirit Chains
Soul Reflect
Soul Armor
Spirit Steed

Right Branches
Locked

Center Branches
Locked

Left Branches
Locked

Nyx was right. Despite getting a bunch of new powers and abilities, I didn't spend any time using them. It wasn't like in video games, where the moment you knew something, you could do it all the time. Witch Angel abilities required practice and training. The closest thing I could compare it to was if someone gave you a class in driving and then handed you a car. Sure, you had a basic understanding and maybe some insight, but the moment you're behind the wheel, you become a speed demon freak of horrific power. Everyone else was an idiot on the road and you are a master, until your hubris causes a fender bender, in full view of a cop car, and your insurance drops you because you don't know what you're doing and are considered high risk. You then must find new insurance while having a mark on your license and a court date, or so I've been told.

"Do you see Spirit Steed?" Nyx asked.

I nodded as I looked over the abilities.

Nyx pulled away from her steed and walked closer to me. "Spirit Steeds can be almost anything, but most witch angels use skeletal horses. Your steed will be made of bones, but can take on a form that best fits what you desire to ride."

I glanced at Nyx and gave her an evil smirk.

Nyx's eyes gleamed, "Riding me will only keep us here."

"I was going to say we could take turns riding each other, but yeah, I suppose we should get someplace first," I muttered.

Nyx moved behind me. She draped her arms and chin on my shoulder. "Think of what you want to ride and summon it."

I glanced at the skeletal horse. It seemed cool, but I wasn't much of an animal guy. Don't get me wrong, I love animals, but I felt I might worry about him too much. Even if the skeletal horse had zero feelings, I would still worry like a loving grandmother who gave you a hundred bucks for your tenth birthday and worried that it wasn't enough.

“Anytime,” Nyx whispered in my ear.

I stood a little straighter. It should be a piece of cake, summoning my ride. An idea struck my thoughts and I silently nodded to myself. I lifted my hand and channeled my thoughts and power into it.

At first, nothing happened.

“Keep your thoughts steady,” Nyx whispered.

I kept my focus, but it was damn hard with Nyx’s body pressed against me. I soldiered up and focused on what I wanted to summon.

A pool of blue fire glowed in the dark grass. Nyx’s steed turned their head and looked over at the circle of blue flames as they danced.

It was at that moment I felt it. A piece of my power broke off like an invisible chain snaking out of my dead heart. It slammed into the ring of azure flames, and something blasted out into the air.

Nyx’s eyes widened as I shouted in triumph. A skeletal motorcycle soared about ten feet into the air before wheels of blue fire slammed down on the grass. White bone nearly glowed in the dim light. The entire thing was made of bones, but what a stylish set of bones it was. The motorcycle was sleek like an old fashion Harley Davidson-Adams. A large ribcage for an engine hummed with power as blue fire glowed within. For a headlight, a yawning skull sat between curved handlebars. The seat was bone white and curved upwards so I could lean back. The supernatural steed stayed upright under its own power; the skull headlight turning to me.

“I wish I could say I was surprised,” Nyx grinned.

I stepped forward, Nyx’s arms and chin pulling away from me. I walked over to my steed and looked it over. It was a sweet fucking ride if ever I saw one. It purred like a panther. I could already tell we were going to be friends.

The moment I touched one of the handles, it purred into a growl. Oh yeah, we were going to be best friends.

I swung my leg over and sat down. Blue fire wheels glowed with power and a light stabbed out from the yawning skull. I glanced over at Nyx and she was eyeing me like I was the coolest kid in the comic book store.

Nyx's steed trotted over to her. It lifted a front leg and Nyx placed her boot on it. With one push, she swung her other leg over the saddle and sat down.

I glanced at the glowing flames detailing my powers and noticed something before it faded away from view.

"I saw that there is an ability called Spirit Flight. Why don't we just fly to town?" I asked.

Nyx and her skeletal horse moved to my side.

"Spirit Flight is not actually flying. It's a way to transverse spirit bridges with special locations and nexus points. Once you reach the Night Market, you will be able to use spirit flight to it. It makes things a little easier for us."

I nodded as I revved up my bike. "But then I couldn't use my sweet ride."

Nyx covered her smile with her hand. "It's called options, you piece of hunky man meat. Now, do you want to race to town, or should I meet you there?"

I never had a chance to answer as Nyx's steed lifted on its hind legs and kicked out its front legs. Blue flames engulfed its hooves as they slammed down. For a split second, I watched Nyx and her steed blast forward like a flaming comet. The skeleton horse's legs moved in a rhythmic blur as it sped on much faster than any living horse could ever go.

"Run, rabbit, run," I whispered as I revved up my bike.

The moment I lifted my leg, the bone kickstand slid up and the bike blasted forward. I let out a shout as I held on for dear life. Azure flame wheels spun into swirls as I peeled onto the road and charged

after Nyx. She was already ahead, her steed's gallop moving supernaturally fast. My bike blazed along the road, following her.

Nyx looked over her shoulder with a wicked smile. She then turned her head, looked forward and lifted her ass in the air as she rode her skeletal horse. She did that on purpose and I knew I would have to give her a spanking later.

Blue flames streaked under hooves and wheels behind us as I was gaining on her. I pulled up beside Nyx and we sped on, side by side. The wind whipped at my face as I enjoyed the smooth ride. It was almost like the bike was floating in the air, blazing along.

Nyx blew me a kiss before stabbing her short heels into her steed's ribcage. The horse's eyes blazed brighter before it pulled ahead.

I glanced down to see how fast I was going when I noticed there was no speedometer. It was a little jarring at first, but I quickly discovered I had to just go with it. As if my bike heard my thoughts, the blue fire wheels burned brighter as I once again gained on the hot witch angel riding a horse.

Nyx let out a laugh and I couldn't help but smile. She was having fun and to be honest, so was I.

Not once did it occur to me of other drivers on the road seeing a skeletal horse and motorcycle on the road. The feel of the wind on me and riding like there was no tomorrow filled my spirit. Being dead was the best thing to happen to my life.

The road forked and we sped to the right. We blazed onto a separate road, our blue fire lighting up the darkness. Nyx was still ahead of me, but I was gaining on her. I pulled up closer to her side as she kept her ass in the air. I could feel the control I had on my bike, and I pulled back on the handlebars. The front wheel lifted off the road as I sped alongside Nyx. She looked down with a wide grin as I pulled my right hand off the handlebar and lifted it up.

I couldn’t believe the sense of control I had. I came a few inches closer as Nyx’s butt bounced. I heaved back and gave it such a smack, Nyx let out a howling moan to the night sky. The front wheel of my bike slammed down on the road, victory in my heart. We sped along as lights from a town appeared in the small distance.

My good fun began to subside as we approached Shroud Point. Nyx and I slowed down as we reached the edge of town. I was turning my head, taking everything in. The moment Nyx mentioned the name of the town, I felt a memory scratch at my mind. The town name sounded familiar, like a song you know but can’t remember the name of or even the lyrics. When we slowed to a halt, the dam holding my memories cracked and flooded my thoughts.

Shroud Point was the town the Grimm had abducted people from before corrupting them. It also corrupted a lot of corpses from the cemetery and had them attack the hotel. Another wave of memories crashed into me. One of the confusing things about my death and coming back was I had no idea on Urth where I was. I certainly wasn’t in or near the town I grew up in. Now that I had some bearings, I was way up in Northvale. Spiral City was southeast from us, and Southvale Harbor was way below that. My old hometown was over a hundred miles away. Way to go Samhain. You took me away from my old life and planted me in an area known for swaths of forests and small towns dotting the land. Northvale did have some harsh winters and considering we were still in autumn; it might get only colder from here. Not that it mattered because I was dead and loving it.

Nyx dismounted and landed on the street. I swung my leg over my bike and stood up. I walked over to Nyx as two pools of glowing blue fire appeared. Her horse moved onto one and sank down. It didn’t make a single noise as it silently vanished from sight.

My bike wheeled over to the second pool of blue flames. It sank down and vanished before my eyes.

“We should go on foot from here. Don’t want to spook the neighbors too much, especially after what happened with the

Grimm," Nyx said and led the way.

I followed as we walked onto Main Street.

The town was pretty big, as far as I could see. Main Street ran through it, but each street branched out into other streets. The town was quaint, like any small town in the middle of nowhere. Strings of lights crisscrossed overhead. Some businesses on Main Street were closing for the night while a few bars and restaurants stayed open.

I looked around as Nyx walked beside me. I was about to ask her if she came here often when I felt a pull along my spirit. It was odd and a little stranger than normal. When Nyx and I reached a wide alley, she turned and walked into it. I followed as the pull on my spirit grew stronger.

I glanced around, seeing a dirty alley and two groups of trash cans. Was the night market in an alley?

"Try to act casual," Nyx said as she walked along, and the air began to shimmer.

I didn't blink as an invisible veil pulled aside like a shower curtain. The plain alley grew wider. Odd lamp posts from medieval times seemed to spring into existence. Odd shops shimmered into view, flanking each side of us. Glowing lanterns of different colored flames hung by shop entrances and stands. The air took on a scent of decay. I spun around, taking it all in like a kid at his first heavy metal concert. The magic, metal, and energy were there, and I wanted to know more.

My turning stopped as a seven-foot-tall, ghostly troll approached me. He had a club in his hand, pointed ears and a sharp nose. I stood my ground as he walked up to me and looked down with hard eyes.

I was ready for a fight when the troll smiled brightly.

"Welcome to the Night Market!" the troll grinned.

"Hi Jak," Nyx smiled. "My partner and I are just here for some supplies, and maybe a drink."

Jak nodded as he looked down on me. “Of course. Witch Angels are always welcomed here. As you can see, there will be no issues, and everyone's on their best behavior.”

“Good to hear. We will run our errands and be on our way. Say high to the gang for me,” Nyx said.

Jak bowed. “It shall be done. Enjoy your visit.”

I watched as the troll lumbered off, club leaning on its broad shoulder. I then turned to Nyx and we walked further along.

“Being dead has its own hardships,” Nyx began. “Some spirits and souls can’t move on or don’t want to move on. They are usually drawn to places like this and try to eke out a living.”

“Why don’t witch angels just come in and help everyone move on?” I asked.

Nyx shrugged. “Most spirits, ghosts, and monsters in these places don’t want to move on. They are often on their best behavior, so we don’t have to come in and clean them out. Jak is part of the Shadow Brigade Gang. A collection of ghosts that help keep the peace, at least here in Shroud Point.

“Most towns and cities will have a night market and their own enforcers to keep the peace. If things get out of hand, they will call upon witch angels to make sure things don’t spill out into everyday life.”

“And here I thought it was just us keeping the world safe,” I smiled.

“We can’t be everywhere at once. It’s nice to know that others share Samhain’s beliefs. Oh, by the way, when we have a drink, I want to know what the boss talked to you about.”

I hesitated. “I think he wanted it to be top secret.”

Nyx looked over to me with sultry eyes, “I have ways to make you talk.”

“If I tell you, I will have to spank you,” I said with the most charming voice I could muster.

“Don’t tease me with a good time,” Nyx smirked before turning to a strange looking building. “We’re here.”

I looked up at the odd warehouse. No windows ran along the street level. Higher windows ran along the top of the building. It was odd as in it seemed the brick walls almost looked like they were melting. I saw wisps of energy leaking from each brick like the whole thing was going to turn into a puddle of ice-cream. A sign with the words “Phantom Supplies” glowed above the main doors.

“The spirit pocket blends with reality. During the day, this entire place will look like a normal warehouse, but at night, spirit energy will leak from it. Let’s get inside,” Nyx explained and moved to the front door.

I followed as the door opened and we stepped inside. There was a buzz of activity as demons, ghosts, and odd monsters moved about. No one paid us any mind as they moved to stacks and shelves of items. They took things from the shelves and stacks, placing them in boxes. Boxes were picked up and walked over to the back where several trucks were parked inside. Boxes were loaded onto trucks as demonic drivers looked over manifests. There was a diligent work ethic as everyone moved with purpose.

“Nyx!” came a deep voice from the side.

Nyx and I turned to see a demon walking toward us. He wore a fancy suit and had a pencil thin mustache. His black hair was slicked back, and he wore a stylish, and I could only assume, an expensive suit. His skin color was a deep purple, but his eyes were red. Small horns stabbed out from his forehead and a pointed tail whipped back and forth behind him as he approached.

“Hi Dyce!” Nyx smiled.

Dyce gave Nyx a small hug before turning his attention to me. I stood like a goon as the demon touched his own chin and eyed me

like I was made of candy.

“Who’s your friend?” Dyce asked with a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“Dyce, meet my partner, Brandon Ferryman,” Nyx said with a warm edge.

“New partner? How did you find one so delicious?” Dyce licked his black lips.

“I put out a bowl of milk and suddenly he appeared,” Nyx laughed.

Dyce let out a haughty laugh. “Well with your beauty and fine assets, I’m sure he’s a keeper.”

The demon bowed to me and closed his eyes. “Dyce Thorn, Proprietor of Phantom Supplies. Pleased to meet you.”

“Good to meet you,” I said and stuck out my hand.

The demon glanced down on my hand before taking it. He didn’t give it a shake, and simply lingered, holding my hand.

“I can tell he has a strong grip to match his strong spirit,” Dyce winked and let go.

“Easy, Dyce. We only came to settle the debt,” Nyx said with an even tone.

“You never let me have any fun,” the demon pouted.

I reached into my leather jacket pocket and pulled out a small sack of soul pennies. I hefted it before tossing it to the demon. Dyce caught it with one hand, but he kept his gaze on me.

“It’s all there. Sorry for not getting it to you sooner,” I said.

Dyce hefted the weight and nodded. “It is all there. I’ve been doing this a long time and I can tell how many pennies just by their weight. And don’t apologize. Hilda had the same problem when she first took over the Coffin Hotel. It’s good to meet new business partners, just so we get to know each other.”

The demon put the sack in his jacket pocket and continued, “I already know you are an honorable witch angel. You came with payment and didn’t make any excuses. You give off an aura of strength. You have a sharp mind, but don’t like to show it because you think others will expect more from you. I sense a degree of happiness, which I’m sure Nyx has some say in.

“How am I doing so far?”

I couldn’t hide my own smirk. “Pretty good, but you left out my rugged good looks.”

Dyce’s eyes narrowed. “You don’t compliment the pie you want to devour,” the demon said and licked his lips again.

Dyce’s demeanor changed from flirty to deadly serious. “I’ll have your food shipment delivered tonight. Payment is every two weeks. Miss a payment, shipments are kept on hold. There is a mandatory meeting once a year, so we don’t drift away and become strangers.”

The demon turned his attention to Nyx, “How’s Hilda?”

“We don’t talk about Hilda right now,” Nyx smiled politely.

Dyce nodded and looked at me. “If you need human flesh, I need at least a few days advance notice.”

I blinked. “Um, no human flesh. Just our normal supplies.”

Dyce shrugged. “No one wants human flesh until they need human flesh.”

“Grave robbing, are we?” Nyx asked Dyce.

The demon gave a simple nod. “It has to be done. There are plenty of necromancers out there who will pay soul pennies for human flesh. Fresh stuff is too messy, and I know killing humans is against the accords.”

Dyce’s gaze shifted to me. “But I might be tempted if Brandon is going to punish me.”

I had no comment as I stood like a simple statue.

Dyce eyed me. “You are a man of few words, Brandon Ferryman. I think we will get along famously.”

The demon lifted his other hand and slid it into his breast pocket. He pulled out a card and handed it to me. I looked down and all it said was Dyce’s name in bold letters.

“I think we should start our working partnership on a good foot. Go to the Sinister Pint and show the bartender this card. He will put your drinks on my tab. Drink as much as you want and enjoy yourselves,” the demon said with a genuine smile.

“Thank…” was all I could manage as Nyx plucked the card from my hand.

“Thank you!” Nyx shouted as she curled her arm around mine and pulled me to the door.

“Don’t be a stranger,” Dyce called out and let out an evil laugh.

We stepped out of the warehouse and into the wide street. The doors swung shut behind us as Nyx guided me down the street.

“If I knew you wanted a drink so badly, I would have brought a flask,” I chuckled.

Nyx’s expression had turned serious as we walked. “It’s not that. Dyce only hands out that card if he’s in trouble or needs help. Something has him spooked and we need to be close by. That’s why he recommended the Sinister Pint. It’s diagonal from his warehouse and he wants us to stay close.”

I glanced up to see that there was indeed a bar diagonally from the warehouse. It had open windows and at least a dozen creatures and spirits mingling. A cauldron with neon smoke blinked as we approached.

“We might as well enjoy our stakeout with a few drinks. Also, you can tell me what the boss said to you, partner,” Nyx smirked.

Three

Dead isn't Always Better

The Sinister Pint was a little kitsch, not that it was a bad thing. The place was like a standard bar, except it had velvet paintings of horror icons, fake spiderwebs, at least I hope they were fake, and a few hanging bubbling cauldrons. The bartender looked like a normal bartender, as in a guy behind the bar. The clientele, not so much as Nyx and I walked in.

An actual zombie and a ghost sat in a corner booth, talking like old friends. A floating cloaked figure put a few soul pennies on the bar and the bartender gave him an odd, glowing drink in a see-through glass mug. A cluster of women sat and cackled in another booth. One of them looked my way and smiled, her fangs very long and pointed.

I tried not to stare as Nyx and I stepped over to the bar. There was a strange scent in the air, like alcohol and decay. I supposed it shouldn't be that weird in a hidden street for the dead and monsters.

"Two pints of spirit ale," Nyx said and pulled several soul pennies out of nowhere. I do mean nowhere. She lifted her hand, unfurled her fingers and there they were.

The bartender nodded and pulled out a pair of mugs. He moved one under the tap and began to pour. When both mugs were filled, Nyx picked up one and I picked up the other. We turned and moved to a counter and stool seating by an open window. Nyx settled down and I sat on a barstool next to her. We picked up our mugs, tapped the mugs together and took a swig.

My eyes widened a little on how good it was. We had normal alcohol at the hotel, but this was a few degrees better. I gulped it down a little more before putting the mug down. My senses were a little dazzled as the feeling settled in my stomach. My shoulders relaxed and I felt like a new man.

“Good stuff,” Nyx smirked as she took another swig.

“What’s in this drink?” I asked before taking another drink.

“Death energy,” Nyx said as she settled onto her stool, one elbow on the small counter before us.

I put my drink down and looked at her. “I’ve heard that said before. What exactly is death energy?”

Nyx nodded. “Death energy is a small, invisible explosion when something dies. The body surges with natural mana, trying to do everything it can to keep the lights on. When it passes the moment of death, the mana changes into death energy. It lingers around the body for a short time before it dissipates into the ether.

“Like most energies, it can be harvested. Mages and gifted individuals can capture and stuff death energy into almost anything. Do you ever get a strange connection to something that may be an heirloom, especially if it belonged to someone when they died? Death energy can linger in inanimate objects and may leak from it for months to years.

“It used to be called mortis, but over the last few hundred years, it has been referred to as death energy.”

I nodded before taking another deep sip. I glanced over to Nyx as she stared at me with loving eyes. I put the mug down and returned her affectionate gaze.

Nyx slid her hand closer to me before resting it on my hand. I caught a sliver of her scent and it whipped at my soul. Was this happening? Were we falling for each other?

“Are we falling for each other?” Nyx asked with a slow blink.

“It seems like that is what is happening,” I said and for some stupid reason, I was nervous.

I grew up thinking relationships weren’t worth the amount of work put into them. My parents loved each other and me, but they fought a lot. When they ghosted me at eighteen, it felt like they

wanted out of the responsibility. There was a subtle feeling, like I was some chain around their necks. They often fought about me, from the few times I caught them in an argument. I tried to keep my head down and ignore it, but as I grew older, it felt like I was the cause of their pain. They would talk about their life before me, but hardly talked about our time together. They always had weird working hours and I nearly grew up by myself.

Nyx squeezed my hand. “Whatever is happening between us, I just want you to know, I’ll suck your dick whenever you like.”

Normally, I would have laughed and talked her into going into a back alley for her to prove it, but the way she said it just now, was deeply truthful, and dare I say, heartfelt. I mean, we were both two dead freaks, but there was a spark there I couldn’t put the tip of my tongue on. Maybe we’ll need to explore it together, naked.

“That has to be the most romantic thing anyone has ever said to me,” I smirked.

Nyx gave me a shy blink before her eyes took on a serious edge. “Before I get further hot and bothered, what did the boss say to you?”

“Shouldn’t we talk about how your friend Dyce may be in trouble?” I asked, trying to deflect.

Nyx punched my leg. “Don’t change the subject. The boss said something to you, and he doesn’t often come around just to talk to specific witch angels. He often sends a courier to you, or you have an audience with him. He’s too busy to just appear and give you a task. He’s a god and gods don’t just give out casual assignments, so tell me.”

I scratched the back of my head for a moment before I spilled the beans. I mean, Nyx was becoming more than just a friend and I got the impression she may punish me in a way I might like, or not like. Either way, I told her about Samhain giving me orders to look out for three defectors from an evil god. I leaned in and whispered that they were bringing an artifact that we could not touch at any

costs. I also mentioned about an envoy from the Sisterhood that would be coming to claim the item and bring it back to the Sisterhood so they can keep it in their vaults.

As I spoke to Nyx, her often whimsical expression grew darker after every word. When I was finished, her head was tilted forward, and shadows covered her eyes.

“He didn’t give you any further details, like the name of the artifact or the god the defectors are leaving?” Nyx asked with a serious tone.

I shook my head. “He told me things would be explained as people arrive. For now, I am to provide protection and lodging for the three mystery guests.”

Nyx gave a slow nod. “This is big. We will have to make sure the hotel is prepared.”

I eyed the beautiful witch angel as she looked to the side, her mind working. “I do have to say, I am still a little lost. You and Vanessa mentioned the Sisterhood to me. I understand that they are a major player here on Urth, but I’m not sure to what extent.”

Nyx picked up her mug and took a big gulp. She put the mug down and began tapping a black fingernail on the counter.

“The Sisterhood is made up of about a thousand banshees. Banshees are undead that can use the power of their voice to do many things. They are powerful and organized. They often handle supernatural threats when we are not called in. Their main castle is located on a large island in the Emerald Sea, to the east. They have been around for thousands of years, protecting Urth from many threats.

“All of them are descended from a single banshee named the Queen Mother. She was the first and created a secret society to do good in the world. Their island is heavily protected against all kinds of monsters and undead. If there were no witch angels on Urth, the Sisterhood would oversee this realm.”

Nyx looked into my eyes. “To have them involved means the artifact is powerful and may corrupt any one of us. The Sisterhood is very disciplined, enough so to make sure no one will ever see the artifact again.”

Vanessa’s image floated into my thoughts. “Vanessa is, or was one of them. She hasn’t spoken too much about it, but I keep getting the feeling she deserted them. I didn’t want to ask too many questions, but there may be a problem if a Sisterhood envoy is coming.”

Nyx nodded and smiled at me. “You may have to use your charms to get information from her.”

I blinked. “Are you pimping me out?”

Nyx sipped on her drink. “More like a secret mission. Everything I told you is all I know about the Sisterhood. Vanessa will know more. Find out what she knows and maybe we can provide better protection for the envoy and the defectors.”

My mind began to work, and I gave my partner my own sinister smile. “How about this, you and I will both try to find out everything we can from Vanessa. There is no reason why we both can’t try.”

A tinge of pink touched Nyx’s pale cheeks. “A co-op secret mission? I like where your mind is going.”

I nodded. “Gather intel and share anything we find. We bring Mara and Lydia in to help make sure the hotel is well protected.”

“A fivesome? You’re a wicked dark angel,” Nyx said before placing her hand on my thigh and giving it a squeeze.

Since the moment I met Nyx, I knew she was a crazy, oversexed hot piece of ass. But now, I think things were getting serious between us and I wasn’t against it.

Nyx’s gaze shifted to beyond the open window. I followed her gaze, looking at Phantom Supplies. The lights were on and shadows moved but it seemed like a normal night for the warehouse.

“Dyce can often take care of himself, but I think this time, he might be in over his head,” Nyx mentioned.

I stared at the building as I spoke, “You said you didn’t know Hilda or come here often. How did you know about the Night Market here and Phantom Supplies?”

Nyx squeezed my leg again. “I’ve traveled to many places across Urth. Phantom Supplies is a chain and Dyce is often traveling to different locations. I have been to this night market at least two times for different missions. As you know, Dyce is a character and likes to make a statement. I had a feeling he might be here when he demanded a meeting. It’s his way of causing trouble and having an excuse to party. If he wasn’t in trouble, he would have joined us for drinks.”

“What do you think is happening to him?” I asked as I finished the last of my drink.

“Dyce has made some enemies over the years. Business deals that went bad. He also deals with less than sterling clientele. He knows he can’t do black market deals with the dead, souls, and spirits; but that doesn’t mean he can’t make deals with other kinds of black magic, monsters, and questionable artifacts.

“Witch angels deal with the dead and threats to nexus points. We tend to stay out of other affairs unless asked specifically to intervene, like zombie nests, certain monsters, and ghostly attacks. Superheroes deal with living and unusual threats, like super villains. We all kind of work together, but we have different threats we monitor.”

Nyx never took her gaze off the warehouse. “I’ll admit, I have a soft spot for him. If he’s in trouble, I want to help.”

“We will help,” I smiled.

Nyx glanced at me and visible relief touched her orange eyes. When she looked back at the warehouse, her fingers dug into my thighs.

I turned my head and looked at the warehouse. The front doors opened, and bodies spilled out. They all looked at each other with confused eyes. One closed the doors and shooed everyone from the building. The small crowd of workers broke away from each other. Some walked along the market street. A few made a beeline for the Sinister Pint.

Nyx and I watched as three demons stepped in and moved to the bar. They sat down as the bartender took their drink orders. When the bartender walked away, the demons began talking loud enough for us to hear.

“Dyce never lets us leave early,” one demon said.

“He did seem stressed, more than usual,” said another demon.

“I don’t care. It’s been forever since I had a little extra time off. I’m going to get shit-faced!” said the third.

Nyx and I slid off our barstools and walked to the front door. We stepped out onto the street and looked over at the ghostly warehouse. Two shadows moved in the light, touching the ceiling inside. One of them waved their hands as the other one stood like a black shadow.

Nyx and I walked toward the warehouse.

“Have you used your stable overload?” the witch angel asked.

“Not yet,” I said, feeling like an idiot for not getting to know my new abilities.

“I know you can handle yourself, but we have to be careful.”

We reached the doors and looked from side to side. Since there were no windows on the ground floor level, we couldn’t see what was happening inside. If we opened the door, we could be stepping into something deep and smelly, like when you’re not paying attention, and someone was walking their dog ahead of you.

Nyx and I looked at each other.

“Around back,” we both said at the same time.

We both turned and made our way to a thin alley beside the warehouse. We walked single file, me in the lead. I don't know how it happened, but I was ready to take charge. The good thing about being dead is, you don't have to worry about losing your life. I was tougher, stronger, and quicker than I ever was in life. Plus, I regenerated, so there's that.

Whatever was happening in there, I felt confident Nyx and I could handle it.

I stepped out to the back of the warehouse. There was a lot filled with delivery trucks. One of the gates was closed to the building, but another one was open with a truck sitting in it. I stepped closer as light spilled out. I felt Nyx's hand on my back as I approached the edge of the open gate and peered inside.

The warehouse was empty, save for Dyce standing and talking to someone. A figure was just hidden behind a stack of crates. Dyce lifted his hands and waved them as he turned around.

"Do you know how much trouble this will cause me!" Dyce complained as he finished turning and looked at the hidden figure.

I listened intently, but barely heard another voice. I couldn't understand what they were saying, but Dyce had no issue complaining louder and louder.

"It's not about the money!" Dyce shouted. "It's about doing something that will cause witch angels to shut down my entire business. There's a reason no one fucks with them! It's better to work with your enemy than against them!"

I felt Nyx's hands on my shoulders and her knee stab me in the back. Before I knew it, she was on me, peering in over my head. She wasn't heavy, but the single knee in my back wasn't all that comfortable.

I kept my gaze and ears on the conversation. The hidden figure lifted a hand into view. They unfurled their fingers and showed a

black crystal with a red, glowing core. It pulsed like a heart as it was held before the demon.

Dyce shook his horned head. “I could sneak in one or two with a shipment, but not a crate! There’s no way I can talk my way out of that. They will know something is wrong. The witch angels at the hotel are smarter than most. They will trace it back to the delivery and question me.”

The hidden figure said something.

Dyce let out a sarcastic laugh. “I’ve heard that before and everyone who goes against witch angels get their asses kicked. You can threaten me all you like, but I’m more scared of witch angels than you, whoever you are.”

Something pressed at my senses. The longer I stared at the hand with the crystal, the more it felt familiar. It happened when I first arrived at the hotel. I felt it with the orcs, Lydia, and Vanessa. It was a touch of death. The person Dyce was speaking to was some kind of undead and I felt their power beginning to grow.

The hidden figure closed their hand over the crystal and lowered it out of sight. Dyce seemed relieved until a silver handgun lifted into view and aimed at Dyce’s chest. The demon let out a yelp as he took a step back, his palms facing out from his chest.

“Now now, no need to escalate this. Maybe we can work something out. No deal is worth dying over.”

“You should have taken the payment,” the hidden figure growled.

The world around me grew crystal clear as my knees slowly bent further. As Samhain and Nyx told me, witch angels fight for justice and protection. Every thought went out of my head as purpose filled my heart. Dyce was standing up for himself and someone brought a gun to an argument. It lit a fire inside me as I leapt up through the opening and onto the main floor. At the same time, Nyx pushed off my back and flipped through the air. The two of us landed like two

silent ghosts. We would have had the edge, except for Dyce turning his gaze to the side and seeing us rushing to him.

“Get em!” Dyce shouted before the gun went off.

Light flashed before my eyes as the gun jerked from going off. A bullet spiraled through the short distance before striking Dyce in the chest. His entire body rag dolled backwards, arms and legs lifting up and his back smashing into a set of crates.

A burning sensation touched my entire body and before I could get a thought in, power rippled through me. Muscles glowed with supernatural power as I felt my hair smoke and flash into blue flames. To my right, Nyx’s hat fell away as her own hair flashed into blue flames. Our eyes glowed with a pale blue as we charged.

The figure pulled back out of sight just as I slammed my shoulder into the standing crates. I had no idea how strong I was and certainly didn’t expect the crates to shatter into an explosion of wood shards and bananas. Really? There was just a crate of bananas!

As wood and bananas floated in the air, I glanced to the side to see Nyx at Dyce’s side. The demon feebly lifted a hand and pointed a claw in my direction. I glanced to the side to see a figure in black aim their handgun, finger on the trigger.

I fucking hesitated. My entire soul was stunned as the person in black, with a hood over their head, aimed a silver handgun. The Seven Twelve filled every thought in my head and I froze.

The figure pulled back on the trigger. The hammer cocked back on a rune covered handgun. When the hammer slammed forward, light stabbed out of the barrel, followed by a noisy bang!

Nyx threw herself on Dyce just before the bullet struck her back. Nyx cried out in pain as a hole opened in her back and dark energy blasted up into the air.

My hesitation died when I heard the pain in Nyx’s voice. The world slowed down as fire engulfed my fists. I swung my right fist

around, blue fire bashing away floating bananas and shattered wood.

The figure turned the gun toward me as my fist slammed into their hand. Bone cracked and the gun went flying from the figure's hand. Power blazed and poured from my eyes as I made an inhuman growl. Bananas and destroyed wood shards fell around me as I continued to charge and slammed my shoulder into the figure's chest. Power exploded as the figure grunted and slid back on his feet.

"Justice," I growled as I launched at the figure in black.

They held up their hand as their gun clattered away. In a blink, the gun flew back into their hand just as I was on them. My left fist came up and struck their ribs. The figure was thrown sideways and into more crates. They lifted their revolver, aimed, and pulled the trigger. I stepped forward when something slammed into my chest, followed by pain.

I grunted as pain crawled and throbbed along my chest from the wound. I glanced down to see bluish energy pouring out. My stable overload form flickered before the bullet was forced out and it clattered against the floor. I lifted my gaze to see the figure in black pull back on the trigger again.

Oh no you don't!

My body contorted to the side as a bullet zipped past me. Limbs moved with agile dexterity as I ducked to the side, another bullet shooting past me. I bent my knees and launched forward, another bullet missing my cheek by an inch. I judged my movements and my timing to how the figure was aiming. If I didn't have my heightened senses and reflexes, I would have been hit every time.

"Not again," the figure growled as they were to their feet, their hood falling back.

I stared hard at the man before me. His lower face was still covered, but something in the eyes matched to someone I dealt with

before. It couldn't have been him, could it? I killed him after he shot me several times. I saw his brain after I beat him with his own pistol. I wanted to laugh and make a joke, but only pain crawled along my soul.

I managed to make it to him, my fiery fist cocked back. I was ready to end their life and send their soul to the soul wheel when he aimed his pistol at my head and pulled the trigger.

My hand shot up, palm out. The bullet struck my palm, and I closed my fingers. Pain flared as the bullet was poking out of the back of my hand. I opened my hand and grabbed him by his jacket. My left fist struck his cheek and he let out a torturous scream. Ghost fire burned at his cheek. I was ready to tear him to pieces when he drove his knee into my gut. I barely flinched as I lifted him up and smashed him into a stack of crates.

The gunman's hands moved in a blur, pulling bullets from a pocket and slammed them into the gun so quickly, I could barely understand how he did it, never mind see it. My hand fell on his wrist with the gun, and I twisted it so hard, bone snapped. The man grunted as his gun fell. I pulled back one fist as I held him with my other hand. Ghost fire burned at him as he grunted in searing pain. The gun flew back to his other hand, and he pressed it to my temple.

"Death to my killer," the man said darkly as the hammer cocked back.

My head shifted to the side as the gun went off before my eyes. Despite my power, darkness stabbed across my vision, and I couldn't see. I went to punch him again when the butt of his handgun slammed into my temple. I tried to blink away the blindness as the barrel touched my stomach and went off three times.

If they were normal bullets, I probably wouldn't have flinched. But these were not normal bullets. I felt them push into my stomach and pain roared. Blind and hurting, I let go and made a swing. My fiery fist struck the gun and sent it clattering away. I heard the figure

break away. My vision slowly began to return as I spun around. I caught a glimpse of a dark figure sliding out the back, past a truck.

I turned to give chase when I heard Nyx scream behind me.

I turned back to the witch angel as she was on her knees. Power surged out of her back before a strange bullet popped out. It rolled off her back and hit the floor. Relief touched her eyes. She glanced at me before looking back to Dyce.

The demon was still on the floor, clutching at his chest wound and a smarmy smile across his black lips.

“That was certainly very exciting,” the demon smirked, followed by a bloody cough.

Four

It Can't Rain all the Time

My legs trembled and I let out a groan. My hair returned to normal as I fell onto my knees. The burning sensation in my stomach flared hotter, like eight tacos from a dirty taco truck after a night of drinking. Sure, they were cheap and tasted great, but you pay again later. You always pay later.

I lurched forward onto my hands as power pulsed throughout my entire body. I gave one long, deep grunt. Metal bullets were pushed out of my stomach and clattered on the stone floor under me. I instantly felt better and lifted my head.

Nyx was helping Dyce to stand up. The demon rubbed his chest, and it seemed the bleeding slowed, or even stopped. He fixed his collar as Nyx let go. She looked at me with worried eyes until I slowly stood up.

I glanced down at myself. My jacket wasn't hit, but my black shirt had a few holes, splinters, and banana guts. My wounds began to close, as did the fabric over it. In a matter of seconds, my clothes looked brand new. The crate splinters and banana guts melted away. Thank you, magical regeneration.

"I'm sure you both want an explanation," Dyce coughed.

Nyx and I looked at the demon as he picked up a small crate shard on his shoulder and flicked it away. He stood straighter and gave us a small, dim smile.

"That knave came into my place of business and demanded I store several chaos crystals in your shipment to the hotel. That was shortly before you arrived. He hid behind crates when you entered and came out after you left.

"We had a small discussion before I refused. There was no amount of soul pennies that would have me behave like some common criminal. Upon my refusal, he flashed me his gun. I ordered

my workers to vacate the warehouse, so their lives would not be in danger. I wanted to see if I could distract him long enough for both of you to show up."

Dyce looked at the destroyed crates and splattered bananas on the floor. "My banana shipment!"

I glanced at Nyx and she shrugged. I looked down at the mess around my boots and saw several of the strange bullets. I knelt and picked one up. I stood up and looked the bullet over between my fingers.

Runes covered the bullet. They gleamed with tiny slivers of light. For a simple bullet, it had some heft to it, making it heavier than it looked. I turned it around, taking in each marking when the metal bullet began to fade away.

I stared at the bullet as it faded from between my fingers. The moment it was gone, I looked down at the floor as the other bullets began fading away to nothing.

There is no feeling quite like being dead and having the strange and unusual become stranger and more unusual. I knew the gunman. Memories stabbed at me as I remembered him in the Seven Twelve Mart, sticking his gun at me and begging for me to call an ambulance. I was so caught up in my petty need for a sliver of happiness, I took out all my rage on him. He was hurt and bleeding but was still enough of a jerk to shoot me for not helping him. Thinking back to the moment, I was truly insane, but to be honest, life meant very little to me at the time. Killing him was one part self-defense and the other part was a manic rage I knew was always there, under the surface.

Why did Samhain choose me to be a witch angel of justice when how I died had no redeeming qualities whatsoever? I didn't defend the store clerk who lost his life. I didn't call the ambulance for the gunman as he bled on the floor. Nyx told me in her last living moments, she saved the driver who slammed into her. She died after pulling her killer from the burning wreck of their car. What I did was

not something a hero would do. Now, a man I killed has come back and was trying to cause trouble for the hotel? Maybe even cause trouble for me.

Nyx looked at the demon, “Dyce, you can stay at the hotel for your protection.”

Dyce shook his horned head. “No need, my dearest Nyx. I have a dozen cousins I can call, and they will be here in a few hours. They will be my security. I have a business to run, and I won’t hide away. My place is here. Too many people and businesses depend on me. Thank you for the offer.”

I woke from my thoughts and focused on Nyx and Dyce. “What are chaos crystals?”

“Chaos crystals are gems made from death energy. Many mages, mystical beings, necromancers, and a dozen others can distill death energy into a liquid state. The more death energy collected, the larger and harder the gem becomes. Once they grow to a certain size, they will have a red glow in their center,” Nyx explained.

Dyce cleared his throat as he further explained. “Chaos crystals are often used to help undead and certain monsters feed for a long time. They can draw death energy from it, and it helps satisfy them over long periods. Another way they are used is to supplement magic for necromancers, warlocks, mages, and liches. They are powerful and not cheap. That is why I was suspicious of our little friend with the gun. He was ready to hand over twenty chaos crystals and have me store them inside the shipments to your hotel. No one does anything like that unless they have a scheme planned.”

I rubbed my jaw as I processed everything Nyx and Dyce said.

“The gunman seemed recently dead,” Nyx added.

Dyce nodded. “He also seemed like he wasn’t sure what he was doing.”

I looked at Nyx, “We should go back to the hotel. We have a lot to talk about.”

Nyx nodded and moved to my side.

Dyce bowed to us. “It was a pleasure, but let’s keep future meetings light and easy. I’ll have your shipment delivered tonight by one of my trusted drivers.”

I smiled and was ready to turn away when Nyx touched my shoulder.

“We can use spirit flight to get back to the front of the hotel,” she said in a low tone.

I nodded, a swirl filling my spirit. It’s one thing to drive here. I can see where I’m going and had control over my bike. But it was another thing to simply teleport blindly back to the hotel. What if I appeared in a wall, or a bathroom while someone was taking a dump? Things could get messy and smelly pretty fast.

“First time is always the hardest,” Nyx whispered in my ear. “Just treat it like when anyone loses their virginity in the back of a gas station bathroom. Smile, ignore the smell, and keep the memory close to your heart.”

I barked out a laugh as Nyx grinned.

“Hold my hand,” Nyx said with a sultry edge.

I took her hand into mine. The connection glowed along our dead spirits. I won the dead lottery with this one.

“Focus on the front of the hotel and will yourself there. The ability should do the rest.”

I nodded and closed my eyes. I pictured the front of the hotel. A second slipped by and I willed myself to be there.

“Don’t be strangers,” Dyce said.

I opened my eyes as reality warped. In the next moment, I was blasted forward in a tunnel made of white and blue light. I screamed

as I was hurtled like a squirrel from a catapult. Sure, it was fun to watch, but not fun to experience. Before I could take another breath to scream again, reality solidified, and I was standing on the stone half-moon driveway of the hotel. I looked over to see Nyx at my side.

“See, easy,” the witch angel said and smacked my butt.

“Yea, easy,” I said and smacked her butt back.

“Easy tiger. Save some of that for later,” Nyx winked.

I smiled before looking at the hotel. “We couldn’t spirit flight into the hotel because of mystical barriers.”

Nyx nodded. “If we did that, we would have been shredded. We would survive, but I don’t think the guests would like ripped up corpses in the lobby.”

A drop touched my cheek. I looked up to see clouds moving across the starry sky. Flashes of light appeared in the distance and the air took on a dank gloom.

“Let’s get inside. Rain is never good for my hair,” Nyx said as she took a step forward.

I reached out and grabbed her wrist, stopping her. Nyx turned to me with curious eyes.

“I knew the gunman,” I said in a low tone.

Nyx turned to me with understanding eyes. “It happens, coming across those we knew in life, even for a moment.”

I shook my head. “No, you don’t understand. I never gave you details of my death,” I said and explained everything that happened on that fateful night.

Nyx listened as I told her the whole sordid moment of my death. I told her my frame of mind and depraved indifference. When I finished, the air was silent between us.

For a moment, I thought this was it for us. She would see me as some freak weirdo and want nothing to do with me. Showing your

raw cookie dough to someone else can be a little too weird. Despite that supernatural bond between us, I thought for sure this would be the camel that broke the needle in the haystack.

Nyx stepped closer to me and draped her arms on my shoulders. Her orange-colored eyes gleamed in the lantern light outside the hotel. A wry smirk formed as she looked at me with tender eyes.

“Bran, you’re not a monster. You just have a monster cock,” Nyx said softly.

I blinked. “I’m not sure, but I think you’re sending me mixed messages.”

Nyx let out a haunting and blissful laugh. “Bran, we don’t become witch angels because of how we died. Samhain chooses our souls and extends an offer, depending on our spiritual strengths and weaknesses. Do you realize how many people lead crappy lives and in their last moments, do something amazing? If that was the only criteria, Samhain would be overrun with souls wanting to be witch angels.

“No matter how good or bad you were in life, all souls eventually go to the soul wheel and are reborn. Not everyone is picked to be a witch angel and that’s okay. Samhain is a god and sees things most of us will never see.”

Nyx leaned in close and kissed me on the lips. I held her waist as our tongues played like two kids on the playground. When she pulled back, we gazed into each other’s eyes.

“As for the gunman, he may have come back as a stronger undead. He may have unfinished business with you.”

I nodded. “I think he might be a revenant.”

Nyx nodded. “I think so too. You’re not the only witch angel with an unusual past. Death is not a neat path for a soul moving on. The rules of death often contradict themselves. We can only help things along to keep worlds and realms from spinning into chaos.”

My heart started to beat as the tension eased in my shoulders. Nyx was right. I had no idea what the rules were, and the gods weren't giving any answers. I was offered a job in the afterlife, and I took it. I can't spend my time thinking about what happened in my past. I had to start living for the moment.

"You seem better," Nyx said softly.

"I am, but I would feel better if you sat on my face."

Nyx smiled as clouds moved overhead, blocking out the starry sky. Raindrops continued to fall as thunder rumbled in the distance.

"Let's get you inside. We have to keep my seat dry before I make it wet," Nyx said with a sultry edge.

We moved to the front steps of the hotel when the entrance door opened. Four zombies shuffled out. They shambled down the stairs. Decayed features turned in our direction. They looked decayed, like roadkill on a cloudy day. The first one to reach the bottom of the stairs turned his rotting head to me and smiled.

"Gift inside. From Edward Reddington. Enjoy," the zombie said with a rough voice.

I glanced at Nyx and she glanced at me. When I looked at the zombies, they were already shuffling to the road, a beat-up van parked beside it. From the driver's side, a cloaked skeleton waved to me.

"Okay," I said as the rain began to fall harder.

Nyx and I climbed the stairs and entered the hotel. The door closed behind us. Lydia was behind the main desk, her expression tired and annoyed.

"About fucking time," Lydia growled.

"Happy to see you too. Anything happen while we were away?" I asked with a disarming smile.

Lydia was not amused. "No, except for that contraption. The zombies said it was a gift from Edward Reddington."

I looked over to see an old-fashioned jukebox. It had glowing, neon light curving into the top. It was gold with silver and brown trim. I stepped over and could see the list of songs from fifty years ago. Nothing in the jukebox was modern and only spoke to the fact that everything dead was really stuck in the past. I touched the side of it and saw that it had a button and a dial to switch it to the radio above the playlists.

I think anyone else who would get this would be annoyed or weirded out. Not me. This was a fantastic gift. I knew some of the songs on the list, hearing my parents play them from time to time from their record collections. Nostalgia came at me for a hug, and I hugged it back.

It was a hell of a gift to give, but we had kind of saved the Head Editor of the Spirit Tribune from dying a second time.

Lydia stepped out from behind the desk in a huff. “Now I can go back to my job of keeping an eye on the wraiths. They keep looking at the two living guests we have. I hope you cleared up the whole supply problem?”

“Supplies should arrive in an hour or two,” I smiled.

Lydia’s brow hardened. “If I might make a suggestion, hire someone to help manage the hotel. I can’t be expected to do everything.”

Lydia was about to walk away when I called out to her.

“Lydia, can we talk for a moment?” I asked.

The dead girl turned to me with a scowl. “Casual or business?”

“Business,” I smiled.

Lydia let out a long sigh. “What is it?”

“Do you know how you became a revenant?”

Lydia’s hard scowl softened. She looked away as a shadow touched her eyes. “I don’t know how I became one, just that I am. I

already told you, my mother drowned me and when I find her, I can end her life and earn my rest. Why do you ask?"

"Nyx and I may have run into another revenant in Shroud Point," I said plainly.

Lydia's demeanor completely changed. It was jarring to see her suddenly become attentive and relaxed.

"You want to know what triggers a soul and body to become a revenant?" Lydia said before looking over to Nyx. "I should be asking you that question."

"Witch angels know a lot of things, but we don't know all the intricacies of being dead and the spiritual world."

I nodded. "The revenant we encountered was from my last moments when I was alive," I said and explained the rest.

Lydia was silent as she listened. When I was finished, she seemed to mull it around in her head as her familiar scowl came back.

"When I died, there was a moment where I didn't want to die. I was filled with sadness, and hatred. I remember screaming into the void. Then I…refused death if that makes any sense. I can't explain it any better than I simply could not allow death to take me."

Lydia slowly blinked as she looked away.

"We don't have to keep talking about it if it makes you uncomfortable. We are only trying to gain some insight as to why a person who tried to kill me was brought back," I said.

Lydia nodded. "No, I get it. I wish I could explain it better, but I don't think there are words for it. There was only a pull. I couldn't let it go. If I did, I would have fallen further into the void. I held on and woke up under…" Lydia trailed off.

The dead girl stood straighter before me and Nyx. "I have to do my rounds," Lydia said meekly before turning around and walking toward a hallway.

I watched her disappear around the corner. Her death haunted her. I could see she was trying to help, but it was too difficult to keep talking about it. I hated to ask, but we needed some answers. The gunman was trying to do something to either me, the hotel, or both, and I had to find out why.

Nyx yawned. “She’ll be okay. I think it’s hard for her to have actual friends.”

“That makes two of us,” I said in a low tone.

Nyx took my arm and leaned into my side. “Let’s go to your room. I think we both need to feel better after everything that happened tonight.”

I looked at Nyx as she rested her chin on my shoulder. “You just want to fuck,” I smirked.

Nyx nodded as her grin shined. “That’s part of it. The other part is we should talk about our secret mission. Vanessa has information about the Sisterhood, and we should discuss our techniques for interrogating her. Our sensual and hot techniques,” Nyx cooed, followed by a maddening giggle.

Five

Music to My Ears

Warm water poured over me in the dreamscape. A bright sun glowed high in the sky as tropical birds filled the air with their magical songs. Wide, green leaves from tall trees cast long, cool shadows. I stood in the waterfall, lost to heavenly bliss.

I knew it was a dream and it didn't stop me from enjoying the moment. It was nice to know I could still dream, even if I was dead. I'm sure the afterlife was a lot of gloom and doom for many spirits, but in my soul, I was going to enjoy my second chance at living my new life.

Bliss continued to crawl along my senses. I felt myself smile as I lingered in the warm waters. Something pulled at me, and I really liked the feeling. It continued with a slow rhythm, and I felt my soul crawl closer to nirvana.

The dreamscape dimmed and soon darkened. The world around me began to melt and shift away. I sighed as I knew I was waking up. When darkness swallowed my dream away, I kept my eyes closed. I felt a mouth on me, gently and slowly sucking. I certainly didn't want to wake up and stop what was happening. Small, wet sounds touched my ears and I silently bent and slid my arm under my head, enjoying the sensations along my standing member. Muffled moans touched the air, blending with the wet sounds. The only thought I had in my mind was how good Nyx's lips felt wrapped around my manhood. I recognized her mouth and slow urgency.

Part of me wanted to enjoy watching her. The other part was simply enjoying the moment. She had a certain set of skills that made her an absolute dream to someone like me. I vaguely remembered a complaint about every guy wanting a nympho until they get one and don't want one anymore. Those words would never leave my mouth because I very much liked having an undead girlfriend with a slew of perverted kinks. I could only assume, since

she has been dead for over eighty years, her horizons grew very broad and deep. Who was I to stand in the way of such desires and urges? If anything, we should see how far we could push the line. If I was a doctor, I would agree with a thumb's up and a firm nod.

Curiosity got the better of me. After the obscene amount of sex from last night, I still wanted to see her beauty as she gagged on my manhood. It wasn't like it was one way. She liked to watch me between her legs, licking and drinking from her like a starving animal.

My eyelids slowly peeled back. I looked down my nude body to see Nyx nestled between my legs. Her eyes were closed as her lips slid up and down. She was in no hurry as inches appeared and disappeared between her magical lips. Small moans filled her throat as she bobbed her head.

I blinked away sleep as I watched her. It took a small moment, but there was something beside the bed. My eyes focused and I glanced to the side. Shock slammed into my senses, and I immediately sat up. Nyx kept bobbing on my member as I turned my head and wide eyes to a ghostly figure floating beside the bed.

Details began to emerge as I stared at the ghostly woman. She wore a simple, long white dress. Her hair was short and slightly wavy. Pale skin covered her high cheekbones and she had beautiful almond shaped eyes. Full lips were stretched into a small smile as she looked down on me.

"Good morning," the floating woman said with an upbeat tone.

"Good morning?" I said as bliss and confusion filled me.

Nyx made a muffled good morning sound as she continued to suck on me and run her tongue under the shaft of my cock.

The ghost woman continued to float as she stayed by the bed.

"Um," I began. I had a hard time putting my thoughts together as I was getting closer to orgasm.

The ghost blinked before realization touched her facial expression.

“I’m sorry, I should have waited,” the ghost said with mild shock.

“Waited? I’m sorry, but do I know you?” I asked, not remembering if she was one of the guests.

The ghost’s eyes widened. “Oh! You don’t remember. I’m the hotel. At least, this is my form when I appear. I’m all around you. I suppose I didn’t have to say that. You already knew that” the ghost said shyly.

Relief filled my shoulders and I leaned back on my hands. “I thought you were one of the guests.”

I glanced down at Nyx as she didn’t break the stride of her lips. “I guess you see this stuff all the time?”

The ghost nodded. “It’s very normal. Many guests have high sex drives. Should I come back when you’re finished?”

“Um,” I said as my cock thickened.

I tried to get my thoughts together, but Nyx had my cock in the vice. I couldn’t break away if I wanted to. I knew what was coming. She knew what was coming. I’m sure the ghost knew what was coming.

“You’re almost there,” the ghost smiled brightly in the morning light streaming into my room.

I parted my lips to say something, anything, when bliss spiked. My manhood thickened and Nyx moaned louder. She upped the pace, her lips kissing the base of my cock in quick succession. It was hypnotic and powerful. So powerful that I lost all control.

Nyx’s lips slid down to the base of my cock and stayed there. Thick spurts of come painted her throat and she quickly swallowed. She moaned for more, gently coaxing out another volley of seed. Damn, she was like an artist, her throat the canvas, and my cock was the brush.

I let out a low grunt as I forced a third spurt into her throat. When the ecstasy abated to a small degree, I let out a long groan and flopped back onto the bed. Nyx slid her lips up my cock and licked the last bit of come from the tip. She then sat up and smiled.

I barely lifted my head to see Nyx eyeing me like a fox that had invaded a chicken coop.

“Now we can talk?” the ghost smiled.

I turned my head to face the ghost. “I think so, but I never found out your name.”

The ghost lowered her head with a sliver of sadness. “I don’t often have a name. Hilda called me her friend but didn’t give me a proper name. Most hotel managers don’t give us names. They often want to keep it professional.”

“That’s not how I want to run this ship,” I smiled. “Is there a name you would like to be called?”

The ghost hovered as she looked to the side, deep in thought. Nyx moved closer and laid next to me. She snuggled close, pushing her breasts against me as her hand took hold of my manhood and began stroking it.

“Sensitive,” I said as I sucked in air. Being dead allowed for quick recovery time, but after a dozen orgasms, it was still a bit sensitive.

“Don’t be a baby, unless you want to be a baby,” Nyx whispered into my ear as I was getting hard in her hand again.

The ghost looked back at me and the sadness pulled back from her gaze. “I always liked the name, Holly.”

“Holly,” I said as I mulled it over in my mind. “Holly is a great name. Holly the hotel!”

The ghost grinned from ear to ear. “Just Holly.”

“Yes, of course. Holly it is,” I smiled before pleasure ran through my cock.

“I see your monster wants to keep playing,” Nyx said and licked her lips.

“It always wants to keep playing. What about your garden?” I laughed.

“It’s so wet, it’s overflowing. You may need to tend to it before I have another discussion with your monster,” Nyx cooed as she placed one leg over my thigh and began grinding against my leg.

She wasn’t kidding. Wetness touched the skin on my leg. She moved her hips like she was marking her territory. I may have to reward her with a spanking.

Holly continued to look down on us. “There is another reason why I’m here. You’ve added enough soul pennies to the hotel, I can open up a few new rooms, if you desire?”

“New rooms?” I said as I tried to keep my thoughts together, but Nyx was having too much fun at my expense.

Holly nodded. “Soul pennies feed me and give me extra energy. I have to grow the hotel with that extra energy.”

“Um, what happens if you don’t grow the hotel?” I was genuinely curious.

“She will start getting very weird,” Nyx whispered as she stroked me a little faster.

Holly nodded. “It could play havoc with the nexus point and surrounding areas. It’s true, I can feed from the nexus point, but soul pennies give me nourishment and allow me to expand my power.”

“Like eating a chicken breast to survive and having a steak to truly live?” I said with a low tone. I wasn’t very good at comparisons.

Holly blinked. “I think so,” she said. I think she was just trying to be polite.

“What kind of extra rooms were used in the past?” I asked through clenched teeth as Nyx tortured me with a good time.

Holly nodded. “Spas, steam rooms, library, work out rooms, a bar. The list is very long. I can create the space for whatever you want for the hotel.”

I tried to think as Nyx kept me under her control. Her hand was gentle, and my cock was still slippery from come and saliva. I made the mistake of glancing at the witch angel and she was smiling evilly, enjoying the blissful torture. When I glanced down to her bare breasts and pointed nipples, I edged closer to the point of no return.

“She needs an answer,” Nyx said with a cruel edge.

Bliss slammed into my senses as I could barely think. Nyx upped the tempo and the earlier sensitivity bled away to pure need.

“Bar! We need a bar!” I said loudly before an orgasm shattered my sanity.

Nyx and Holly watched as a spurt of seed shot up into the air and fell. Nyx grinned as she continued to stroke me, my come acting as extra lubricant. Damn her skill and technique!

Holly nodded. “I’ll begin the process. You should see it in a little while. Enjoy your morning!”

Holly’s ghostly form faded away and she was gone.

I turned to Nyx with an angry gaze. “You could have waited until she was gone.”

Nyx smiled like a brat with her hand in the cookie jar. “But this was so much fun.”

I growled as I pushed Nyx onto her back, and I was over her.

“You must be punished,” I growled.

“Oh no. Please don’t lick my cunt and suck on my clit,” Nyx said in a fake whine and with excited eyes.

“Don’t tell me what to do,” I growled before I slid down her body to her parted thighs.

“You will never break m…oh!” Nyx trailed off as my tongue worked at her wet valley before sucking on her engorged clit to the sounds of early morning birdsong.

***

Nyx and I walked down the corridor. We were fully dressed, but it was hard to get to this point. Nyx didn’t want to leave the bed and I had to pull her from it. She slumped to the floor, and I spent a lot of time trying to get her dressed. She barely wore anything, so I didn’t know why it took so damn long. When I had to get dressed, she leapt up and fondled me as I tried to get my clothes on. It was fun for twenty seconds, but after that, I had to pick her up and toss her back onto the bed to give me enough time to zip up my pants.

We walked toward the stairs to the main lobby. The light coming in from the large window was gray. I glanced out the window to see a dark cloudy sky. There was some earlier birdsong, but it had since stopped as another threat of rain was coming.

We started to take the stairs down when music touched my ears. I looked down at the lobby, seeing Lydia behind the desk. I caught her with a small smile as she nodded with closed eyes to the music. It was classical and floated up from the jukebox. Lights glowed in different colors as music filled our souls.

When we reached the bottom of the steps, Lydia opened her eyes and her face twisted into a scowl.

“Can’t hide it. We both saw you loving the music,” I smiled.

“Fuck off,” Lydia growled and stepped from behind the lobby desk counter. “I was watching the desk until you finally showed up. I wanted to tell you that the supply shipment came in last night and there was another one this morning. I must inspect the second shipment before Mara, and I put it away. So, do your fucking job so I can do mine!”

“Good morning. So happy to see you this morning. I had a lovely night. Thank you,” I said as a positive, implied morning conversation.

Lydia's eyes flashed with heat. The dead woman in a black trench coat stormed off toward the main floor corridor and disappeared.

"She really likes you," Nyx whispered in my ear.

"How do you even know that?" I asked.

"You can't sense her affection for you? Are you ignoring your spirit sense?"

I shook my head. "Sometimes, the mystery is an added spice."

Nyx's eyes gleamed. "I like the way you think, daddy."

"Oh, we've graduated to new names," I smirked.

Nyx's gaze took on a seductive flair. "We've barely scratched the surface, but for now, I will let you handle the first part of the mission."

My eyebrow lifted. "First part?"

"You don't remember? Oh, well, I was talking while you took me from behind. Either way, the plan is, get to know Vanessa and see what she can tell us about the inner workings of the Sisterhood. Simple."

I scratched the back of my head. "Doesn't it seem a little dishonest? Shouldn't we just talk to her and find out what she knows?"

Nyx let out a small laugh. "Bran, my love, between life and death struggles, monsters, end of the world scenarios, and epic battles, sometimes little games make our kind of life a little more enjoyable. Do your best and have fun. There will be plenty of time to be warriors of justice. For now, follow your heart."

Nyx pulled back her hand to smack my ass. I turned to her just as she swung her hand. I caught her by the wrist and held it in place, a full foot from my rear.

"You have to earn the right," I said with steely eyes and a firm tone.

Nyx's gaze melted. "Oh…yes, daddy," the beautiful witch angel said in a low, sultry tone.

She trembled as she pulled away. I watched her as she tried to walk but seemed to weave like her whole body had turned to jelly. When she reached the edge of the corridor, she looked back with a wicked and dripping gaze.

"I'm going to help Lydia and Mara with checking the supplies and look around the hotel for chaos crystals. Until I see you later, I hope my punishment fits the crime."

Nyx gave me a slow, seductive blink before stepping out of sight and she was gone.

Fuck, that woman pushes all my buttons and a few extra buttons I didn't know I had.

Heat touched my neck quickly before it cooled. A small sound came from the front doors. I woke from my haze and stepped over to the doors. With a quick grab of the handle, I opened the door and looked out.

A skeleton with a satchel was riding away on an old-fashioned bike. The skeleton raised his hand and gave a small wave before continuing down the road.

I waved to Toby as he rode out of sight. I looked up at the dark, cloudy sky. The threat of rain was growing again, and I could sense it in the air. I looked down to see my copy of the Spirit Tribune on the landing before the door. I reached down and scooped it up. I turned and stepped back in.

Music flowed from the jukebox as I placed the rolled-up paper on the lobby desk. I was ready to man my post when an odd feeling pushed at my senses. I turned and looked at the jukebox, feeling like the odd sensation was coming from it. To my surprise, the wall beside the jukebox began to buckle and fall into itself.

I turned fully to the wall opposite of the front desk. A vague archway began to take shape as part of the wall crumpled and

melted into itself. It slid down to the floor and mended with the hardwood floor. The archway solidified and a blank, metal plaque appeared over it. The archway was wide, but what was past it caused my heart to beat with excitement.

I stepped toward the archway, my unblinking gaze drinking in the new chamber. A polished, dark wood bar took up one side of the room. Glass mirrors were on the wall behind the bar and shelves filled in the space before the mirrors. Tables and chairs filled the space to my right. A large, bay window looked out from the front of the hotel. A silver chandelier hung from the center of the high ceiling. There was an urthy, rustic scent to the place, like a high-class dive bar. The room looked new and old at the same time and that spoke to me. I wasn't much of a drinker before I died, but now, this was a place I wanted to hang out in, like all the time.

A ghostly spirit appeared next to me. I looked over to see Holly smiling.

"What do you think?" the hotel ghost grinned.

"I like it. I really like it," I said as I continued to drink it in.

"I'm glad you like it! I made the room before opening the archway. I wanted it to be ready when you came downstairs. As you can see, liquor, beer, wine, and spirits will need to be added. I created the taps, so all anyone must do is attach the kegs.

"The only thing it needs now is a name."

I kept looking around, getting a feel for the place. The hotel was called the Coffin Hotel, so I thought I should stay with the theme. I wanted it to be a place to get away from everything and drink in peace. A name came to mind, and I smiled.

"Sanctuary," I said.

Holly nodded. "I'll have the name on the plaque. To avoid confusion, I'll add 'Bar' to it."

"That sounds great. You really did an amazing job with this room," I said as I looked around.

Holly blushed, a pale pink touching her pale features. “Thank you. When I have more energy, we will create more rooms for anything you like.”

I turned to Holly just as she faded away. I resisted the urge to ask her to stay and have a drink. We didn’t have any alcohol in here yet, but I’m sure I could have grabbed something from the kitchen.

“Maybe when it’s all set up,” I whispered before turning and exiting the bar.

I stepped into the lobby and scooped up the Spirit Tribune paper. I was feeling pretty good. Morning sex, a new jukebox, and a new bar helped chase away the weirdness from last night. I pushed away any thoughts of the gunman and the chaos crystals. Nope, I was going to keep having a good morning and to hell with the rest of the outside world.

The moment I opened the paper to the front page, my eyes widened a hair as I read the headline.

Local Hospital is Terrorized by a Wailing Spirit!

The headline took up most of the page. In the corner was a small article with Edward Reddington’s smiling face and top hat.

Head Editor of the Spirit Tribune Donates Jukebox to The Coffin Hotel!

“I thought the hotel could use some life, so I donated it because the hotel manager is a close personal friend, and he needs something to liven up the establishment.”

My gaze flicked back and forth from each headline. Mixed emotions ran through me. I was worried about the first headline, and I was annoyed with the second headline. This wasn’t an act of charity if he plastered it on the front page. Edward did it to sell papers, that finely dressed wolf in sheep’s clothing!

I glanced at the phone, mentally preparing myself to call the Spirit Tribune and curse out Edward, when a shadow touched the edge of my furious gaze.

I turned and looked up at the top of the stairs. Bright gray light framed the woman in the long dress at the top of the stairs. As my eyes adjusted, I saw Vanessa's features appear. A sorrow clung to her brow as she looked down with dark eyes.

"Brandon, I have to speak to you and it's very important," the banshee said as she took one step after another down the stairs.

Six

Raising the Bar

I put the paper down on the counter and stepped toward the stairs. I watched Vanessa as she came down with worry and heartache in her eyes. Judging from the headline, it was easy to assume it was her wailing by the hospital, but I didn't want to come out and say it. I may be the manager of the hotel, but what she did outside of the hotel was none of my business. Despite that, the way she looked at me as she stepped down spoke deeper than her feeding habits.

Vanessa and I reached the bottom of the stairs. I looked at her as she looked down at my chest. The air between us held an uncomfortable edge. I think there was always a spark between us, but it was hard to pin down, considering all the monster and dead attacks from two weeks ago. Vanessa was caught in the middle of it, duped by the former hotel manager to bring a special scroll. The scroll was part of a portal ritual. Hilda was bent on opening a portal to the hotel and using a Grimm to corrupt the nexus point. It would have given the Grimm a foothold in our realm.

The memory stayed in my mind's eye, seeing Vanessa realize what was happening and fighting to stop it. I already knew she had left the Sisterhood to live a new life, but the Coffin Hotel is the furthest she's gone on her own.

I remained silent, caught in her elegant beauty. Long, wavy hair framed her features. High cheekbones gave her an aristocratic look, but her shyness brought her down to Urth. She was beautiful in a way that you wanted to bring her to fine dinners, hold the door open, and talk about our feelings over wine and those fancy cheeses.

"Can we talk, someplace a little private," Vanessa said as she kept her gaze low.

She said, "a little private" and I turned and looked over to the bar archway.

Vanessa followed my gaze, “Is that new?”

I nodded. “It’s the new bar, just opened today. There are no drinks inside yet, but we can sit down and talk if you like?”

Vanessa looked up at me with warm eyes and a small smile. She gave me a small nod. Her small smile was infectious, and I couldn’t resist my own. I mean, I liked her, but it seemed like I liked her liked her.

We walked side by side to the archway and stepped into the new bar. I stepped over to a table and pulled out a chair for her. Vanessa did a little curtsey before sitting down. I grabbed a chair, lifted my leg over the back of the chair and sat down. I looked at Vanessa with attentive eyes. The Ryker Maneuver never fails when it comes to impressing the opposite sex. If it did, then TV lied to me.

Vanessa kept her smile and her eyes seemed to gleam a little brighter. Yep, the maneuver worked!

“What did you want to talk about?” I asked with an understanding tone.

Vanessa let out a small sigh before lifting her chin and looking me directly in the eyes.

“I have to leave,” she said with a firm, but low tone.

I lifted an eyebrow.

Vanessa continued. “I don’t have many soul pennies left. What I do have is enough to get me to Southvale and stay with a few acquaintances. After that, I have to figure something out.”

Vanessa looked away as she continued. “I can’t tell you how exciting it was to be here. I know with the Grimm and Hilda, things were a little out of control, but compared to my previous life, it has been an amazing stay here. I had a kind of sheltered existence before I died.

“When I was brought back, I was a new sister in the Sisterhood. I thought things would be more exciting since I died, but the

Sisterhood was more like a convent. There were strict rules and laws we had to abide by, and I followed them for years until I couldn't take it anymore.

"Hilda gave me a way out and I took it. I didn't know she was trying to destroy the world. From our talks, she seemed like a trapped soul, just like me. We shared a connection, even if it was a little one."

Vanessa shook her head. "The Sisterhood offered security, but my soul cried out for adventure."

"Is leaving for Southvale what you really want?" I asked.

Vanessa looked into my eyes for a moment, before looking away. "I don't know."

I don't know why, but I reached forward for her hand. Something compelled me and when I touched her hand and held it in my own, images and emotions slammed into me. It was like a tidal away of jumbled chaos. I saw a hospital. I felt strands of death curling up. A window appeared and my hands grabbed at it and opened it. I floated in as an elderly person was in bed, their eyes closed. I stood over them, licking my lips as a death rattle touched the air. An image of myself appeared as I opened my mouth. No, it wasn't me, but Vanessa's thoughts of me. There was affection and pain. Black tendrils of energy rose up as the elderly person passed on. I watched their soul float away as I gorged on black tendrils of death energy. My hunger abated, but my soul cried out for something else. Something warm.

Electricity arced and I snatched my hand back. It wasn't so much that it hurt but instead surprised the hell out of me. I glanced up to horror and embarrassment in Vanessa's eyes.

Vanessa stood up and looked away. "I'm sorry. This was a mistake."

I reached out and grabbed her hand. Vanessa looked down at me with wide eyes. There was no electrical shock this time. All I

could feel was two vibrations, singing to each other.

“Please stay,” I said.

Vanessa looked down at my hand holding her hand. She looked back to my eyes and something within her relented. She stepped closer and sat back down in her chair. I was still holding her hand and she made no move to pull it away.

“I want to stay,” Vanessa said in a small voice.

“I am the manager,” I smirked. “Maybe we can figure something out.”

Vanessa’s gaze widened a hair as hope filled them. “You would do that, for me?”

I nodded. “As you can see, I have a lot of positions open in the hotel. You don’t have to stay forever, but maybe long enough to earn some pennies for your next big adventure.”

Vanessa’s fingers curled around my hand and squeezed. She parted her lips to say something when Lydia stepped through the archway to the bar and let out a long whistle.

“Holy shit. We have a bar now?” the revenant remarked as she looked around.

Vanessa’s hand slipped from my hand and placed it on her lap.

I looked up to Lydia. “We are kind of in a meeting,” I said.

Lydia looked at Vanessa, then to me, then back to Vanessa, then back to me. “Is it a business meeting?”

“It’s a business meeting,” I said.

Lydia shrugged. “I just wanted to tell you the shipments are clean.”

The revenant glanced around at the empty bar again. “I’ll speak to Mara about stocking the new bar. This place looks classy as fuck.”

“Can we watch the fucking language?” I laughed.

Lydia smirked. “No.”

The dead girl turned and walked off, her trench coat billowing behind her. I don’t even know how she could do that, since she had an arsenal within it. The coat must be a hundred pounds and she walked around like it weighs nothing.

I turned back to Lydia, who was looking at me with adoring eyes. “Where were we?”

“I think you were offering me a job,” Vanessa said with a shy tone.

I nodded. “What would you want to do?”

“I can’t tend bar. I barely know any drinks,” Vanessa said and looked out of the bar to the front desk. “I can help with the front desk.”

“How are you with filing paperwork and paying bills?”

Vanessa's eyes gleamed with pride. “I’m very good at tracking my spending and making sure all paperwork is in order. I don’t like loose ends. I’m a stickler for personal finances,” she said with a nervous laugh.

“You’re hired,” I smiled. “You can start tomorrow.”

Vanessa’s smile beamed bright. “Thank you, Mr. Ferryman! You won’t regret it!”

“Please, call me Bran. As you can see, we kind of run this place by the seat of our pants.”

Vanessa was all smiles when several figures walked into the bar.

I turned to see Lydia, Mara, and Nyx stepping in with a crate in each of their hands. Lydia had her usual dour expression. Mara’s eyes were filled with stars as she drank it in. Nyx looked at me and Vanessa and gave a small, approving nod. I think my girlfriend liked what she saw.

“This place looks amazing!” Mara said as she moved to the bar and placed a crate filled with different colored bottles in it on the bar top.

I stood up and took Vanessa’s hand. I gave a gentle pull and she stood up.

“Everyone, I want to introduce our newest member to the team. Vanessa Ode will be working the front desk for the foreseeable future,” I announced.

“Welcome to the team!” Mara said as she rushed over and hugged Vanessa.

Nyx put her crate down on the bar counter and pulled out five glasses.

“This is the perfect moment to celebrate,” the witch angel smiled as she snatched a bottle from Mara’s crate and began pouring a dark, amber liquid into each glass.

“This is the kind of job celebration I can get used to,” Lydia smirked.

“I hope the boss doesn’t get mad with day drinking?” Mara said as she stared directly at me.

“I won’t tell if you don’t,” I winked.

Nyx stepped to the group and began placing glasses in everyone’s hand. When she placed a glass in Vanessa’s hand, her hand lingered, touching the banshee’s hand.

“Welcome to the family,” Nyx said with a sultry whisper.

Vanessa was silent, but her eyes widened a little. She lifted the glass up and took a long sip, her gaze never leaving the sexy witch angel.

I took a long sip from my drink as Mara and Nyx stayed close to Vanessa. Lydia placed her crate of liquor bottles on the bar top before fishing out a bottle and pouring more whiskey into her glass.

I watched them as they congratulated Vanessa. She seemed a little overwhelmed and mostly listened. I don't think she ever had so much attention on her as she did now.

I still had to find out what she knows about the Sisterhood, but now that she was part of the team, maybe I could wait a little bit. I still couldn't believe Samhain put me in charge to run this place, but strangely, it was coming together. If I was going to be here for the next three hundred years, better make it a place worth staying.

Part of me wanted to get everyone back to work. But a larger part of me wanted to enjoy the moment with so many beautiful ladies. I took a long sip as Vanessa and Nyx glanced at me. I smiled. Mara looked over with warm eyes. I took another sip.

Lydia was behind all of them. She looked at me, lifted a hand and gave me the middle finger. When Mara glanced over to see what I was smiling at, Lydia took hold of her glass with both hands and drank down the rest of her whiskey.

Music poured from the jukebox just outside the Sanctuary Bar as Nyx poured into empty glasses. We raised them up in solidarity before we downed them in blissful content.

***

The whole lobby was still moving. I was behind the front desk, looking at the glowing lights of the jukebox as the walls rippled. I turned my head to the stairs. I looked at the big window at the top and the dark of night beyond it. A pitter patter of water ran down the glass as the world outside the hotel was filled with wet rain.

I don't know if it was a special moment, or everyone just wanted to drink. The front desk was not bothered by anyone for several hours, which led to more drinking with our little group. We stayed in the bar, Nyx pouring more spirits into glasses and all of us drinking, getting college drunk.

I didn't mind as we were laughing and carrying on. Mara was the first to leave, saying she had to get dinner ready. Lydia was next,

saying she had to make her patrols. Vanessa and Nyx lingered. I spent part of the time getting to know the bar, putting bottles on shelves, and putting glasses below the bar. I pictured myself bartending, but I knew I didn't have the chops for slinging drinks. I was more the bouncer type, grabbing unruly patrons and tossing them out onto the street. Since the front desk was opposite the bar, I could keep an eye on it once I hired a bartender.

Vanessa was next to leave. She gave me a long look before leaving the bar and heading to the stairs. That left me and Nyx. The witch angel gave me a smirk before turning and leaving without a word. Which was weird because I swore, we would have talked about a few things like the gunman, the defectors, and the Sisterhood envoy.

I let out a tired sigh as I held onto the front desk for dear life. Sure, I could push the intoxication away, but I was still having fun. I remembered stumble-walking back to the front desk and swaying as the dark day moved into dark night.

My thoughts floated to Vanessa, and I felt a stupid smile form. I liked her. I liked Mara. I liked Lydia. I really liked Nyx. Sanity touched my inebriated thoughts and I wondered if I could love more than one person and something whispered from the dark recesses of my cracked soul, yes.

My smile vanished as four cloaked figures floated into the lobby from a side corridor. I blinked, trying to push away my inebriated state and stand like a normal person, which was very odd in a place like this.

The four cloaked figures floated closer. Skeletal hands were at their sides and darkness covered their hooded heads. The edges of their cloaks were frayed and tattered. They didn't make a sound as they moved to the edge of the desk.

"Checking out?" I asked the four wraiths.

Cloaked heads nodded in unison.

“Are you heading to the forest out back? It’s raining and your cloaks are going to get wet,” I said as I suppressed a burp.

“It’s fine,” one wraith hissed with a deeply dark voice.

I felt a chill go down my spine. They were undead and couldn’t really hurt me. It was just odd with their polite demeanor clashing with their bone chilling appearance.

“Anything else I can do for you before you go?” I asked with a small smile.

The wraiths shook their heads. One reached into his cloak and pulled out a skeletal hand. They opened it over the front desk and a dozen soul pennies fell. They clattered on the hardwood before becoming still.

“Tip,” the wraith hissed.

“Thank you,” I smiled.

The wraiths nodded and began floating for the front door. The last one turned their dark and shrouded hood to me.

“Five stars,” the wraith said with a creepy hiss before joining the others.

I watched as one wraith opened the front door. Rain poured down from outside as the wraiths floated out. The last one holding the door waved to me with a boney hand before following the others and closing the door behind them.

“I got a tip,” I grinned as I scooped up the soul pennies and put them in the lockbox under the desk.

A long, quiet moment filled the lobby as I stood. It was getting later, and I didn’t think anyone else would be leaving. So, I would do what anyone would do in my situation, go to the bar for a few drinks.

I took one step to the side, ready to go around the front desk, when the front doors opened.

I froze as three people stepped in from out of the rain. On second glance, using the term people was the barest standard to describe them.

One, full-figured lady came in with two others behind her. The woman had long, black hair, a skimpy top and ripped jeans. She was wet enough for her top to cling to her, not that I was looking at her large chest and seeing that she was a little cold. She pointed in my direction, and I wasn't talking about her fingers and hands. I had to force myself to look up to her piercing blue eyes and a smile that could murder a baby goat.

Behind the woman was another woman in a yellowish cloak. Her hood was over her head, shadows obscuring her face, but not her glowing, yellow eyes. She wore what looked like normal clothes underneath, a white shirt, and black jeans. The cloak, shadows over her face, and yellow eyes were a little off putting. She didn't blink at all as she followed the other woman.

The last one behind them was a dark-skinned woman with a top hat and suit jacket. Her face was painted as a white skull. Darkness surrounded her eyes as lines were painted over her lips. I immediately thought she looked like a witch doctor as she walked with her chin held high.

The three of them approached the counter, but it was the full-figured one who leaned forward with her large breasts practically resting on the counter and showing me enough cleavage to start a motorboating convention.

"Hey there, handsome," the woman said with a dreamy tone.

I love when strange hot women say I'm handsome.

"Hi," I smiled as I forced myself to sober up. "How can I help you?"

The three ladies looked me up and down. The one with the large assets bit her lip before letting go.

“I’m sure we can think of a few ways you can help us, but for now, we need to speak with the manager of the hotel.”

“You’re in luck. I’m the manager of the hotel,” I said matter of fact.

The three women’s expressions dimmed, but only for a moment. The one leaning on the desk leaned a little closer. I leaned closer as the rain and wind howled outside.

“We’ve come seeking sanctuary,” the blue-eye woman whispered as her pupils shifted and stretched into rectangular shapes like some creature from the deep.

Seven

Tentacles, Madness, and Dreams

Lightning flashed outside. The white noise of rain blended with the soft classical music floating up from the jukebox.

I stared at the three women as they stared back at me. Unsaid things were being said. This was it. This was my moment to help the boss out and do my part with making the world a better place. Three defectors from some evil dark god? Talk about getting shit done for the sake of goodness and doing my job at the same time.

The only thing bothering me was that the three of them seemed familiar.

I decided I had to play this real cool and lowkey. This was my moment to shine.

The three ladies continued to look at me. The two in the back had plain expressions, but the lady with the rack was all flirty charm.

“Welcome to the Coffin Hotel. I can set you three up with three rooms or, if you prefer, a larger room with three beds?” I smiled.

The woman leaning forward with the deepest cleavage I had ever seen, smiled. “We’ll take the penthouse. It should suit us for the time being.”

I blinked. “Penthouse? Sure thing. That will be two hundred soul pennies a night.”

The dark-skinned woman with the skull makeup and top hat coughed. “I thought we were going to be taken cared of?”

“It’s fine. I’ll handle it,” the woman with breasts that could knock out a short teenager if she turned abruptly, said out the side of her mouth. She kept her weird gaze on me as she smiled, like I didn’t hear her.

“I heard you,” I stated plainly.

The woman continued, “We were told that we would receive sanctuary when we arrived here.”

I nodded. “Yes, you will be protected and given lodgings, but no one said you would be staying in the penthouse.”

The woman gave me her best, beautiful smile. “Is there anything we can do to ensure we get the penthouse?”

I nodded and smiled. “Yeah, you can pay the two-hundred soul pennies a night for the penthouse.”

The woman in the yellow cloak snickered. The woman with the huge assets frowned in annoyance. The woman with the top hat shook her head before stepping to the counter.

“I’ll handle this,” top hat woman said before reaching into her suit jacket and pulling out a large sack.

I had to blink a few times because there was no way a sack that big could fit in her tailored jacket. She placed it on the counter, and I heard the familiar sound of soul pennies clinking together as the sack settled down.

I reached up and tried to grab the sack of coins and the moment I touched it, it vanished.

I glanced up at top hat woman and she gave me a cheery “I didn’t expect that to happen” smile.

Boobarella rolled her eyes as the woman in the yellow cloak continued to snicker.

“Witch angels naturally dispel weak illusions upon touch,” the yellow cloak woman giggled.

“I knew we should have had a plan before coming inside,” top hat lady said out the side of her mouth.

Boobalicious put away her charming smile and looked at me with genuine eyes.

“We have taken a great risk to get here,” she said.

I leaned forward with knowing eyes. “I understand that, but taking the penthouse also puts you at risk. Anything can bash through the big bay windows, and it will take time for me, and my staff, to get to you. I can have three rooms ready on the second floor, close to my room. You will be safe until the envoy arrives and the exchange happens,” I explained.

The woman’s eyes narrowed. “And if we just leave?”

Shit! I hadn’t counted on that bit of logic. If they left, Samhain may be furious and add more years to my contract. Two hundred and ninety-nine years is a long time and I’ve only been on the job for less than a month. No, there had to be another way to come to some understanding or my boss was going to kill me, again.

I just had to play it cool and pretend to be a hard ass. They had to give something up, so they felt like they got one over on me. Yea, that’s the ticket. Just pretend they managed to convince me so we could all walk away happy.

I smiled. “There is one thing you can do to convince me.”

The three ladies perked up with wide eyes.

The woman with the bobbly boobs leaned against the counter again and gave me a wicked smile.

“What can we do?”

“Show me the thing,” I said in my best secret agent voice.

“The thing?” the woman said with a raised eyebrow but kept her smile.

I nodded. “That thing. You know the thing. The thing that this is all about.”

The woman’s eyes gleamed with amusement, “Oh, the thing.”

“Yeah, the thing,” I repeated.

The woman lifted a hand and snapped her fingers.

I watched as an amulet appeared out of the thin air. It hovered and slowly spun like an item you saw on the shopping network in the middle of night. The amulet was round, but in it was a strange, alien eye. It was slitted like a cat's eye, but the color was a sickening yellow and had strange dots along it. They shifted and moved along the eye as it turned its attention to me.

Dark power slammed into my senses. The item radiated like a space heater near your face. It pulsed and I felt a growl whispered in my mind. Reality shifted and started to bend. The longer I stared at it, the more I wanted to put it on. My fingers twitched as a voice in my head whispered, "Put me on."

The woman snapped her fingers and the item disappeared.

"What…was that?" I asked with genuine curiosity.

"That is the Eye of Thull," the woman whispered over the counter. "It's very powerful and boosts any creature's natural power. I keep it in a dimensional pocket so no one can get at it but me. As powerful as the item is, it will corrupt anyone who wears it."

"What kind of corruption?" I asked as I thought about how much I wanted to put that amulet around my neck.

The woman gave me an evil leer. "The amulet likes blood. It doesn't need to drink it, but it likes to see it. The more blood you spill in front of it, the more power it grants until you are so frenzied with power, you become an unstoppable killing machine."

I had to shake my head to remove the tendrils of desire. The item was gone and seeing it still pulled at me. It was truly evil, like those people who sneeze on food on the buffet line.

"So handsome, about the penthouse?" the woman cooed.

I snapped out of it and stood like a manager who got caught taking a nap on the job. "There will have to be some rules we must agree upon."

"Shoot," the woman with dark hair smiled.

“Keep the curtains closed at all times,” I stated.

The trio of women nodded.

“My staff and I will do random visits to make sure all three of you are okay.”

The three women nodded again.

I narrowed my eyes as I continued, “And absolutely no other visitors in the room, under any circumstances.”

It was at that moment the three women glanced at each other.

“Do we have a problem?” I asked.

The woman with the long, dark hair spoke up, “There might be a small problem with that last rule. We’ve been soldiers of chaos for a long time and must feed in certain ways. We can have normal food, but, from time to time, we need to feed on a living, or dead creature.”

“It fuels our abilities,” the woman in the yellow cloak stated matter of fact.

“It also relieves stress,” top hat woman said with a monotone voice.

I stared at all three before realization washed over me. “What are you three, succubi?”

The trio of ladies let out small laughs and giggles.

The dark-haired one spoke up, “Not in the conventional sense, but our old master cursed us with certain appetites. Samhain promised that he could change it, so we didn’t have to take from the living or the dead, but only after we proved ourselves.”

Great! I had to take care of three soul sucking women while they were here. If life couldn’t get any more complicated, now I had to make sure they could feed on someone while they had sex. I rubbed the bridge of my nose as I took it all in.

I pulled my hand from the bridge of my nose and let it fall to my side. I reached under the front desk and pulled out the guest book. I

grabbed a feathery pen and inkwell and placed it on the counter.

“We here at the Coffin Hotel will do what we can to make sure your stay is a memorable one. I do have to sign the three of you in before I can give you the keys to the penthouse. After that, we will have to discuss your feeding habits,” I sighed.

The woman with dark hair and weird eyes nodded. “Lynn Nile.”

“Nora Moon,” the top hat lady said with a small bow.

“Amber Tempest,” the woman with the yellow cloak said in a small voice.

I wrote down their names in the guest book. Three keys appeared on the counter beside the book. I put my hand on the trio of keys and slid them forward. I pulled my hand away as Lynn reached up for the keys. The moment she touched them; lightning flashed from the window at the top of the stairs.

I glanced up and my eyes widened. A dark figure was at the top of the stairs, by the wood railing. They had decayed, green fingers curled around the railing as they looked down. A rumble of thunder followed as the figure stared down, the light of the lobby filling their face.

I wanted to relax when I saw the spiky green hair, green skin, and green clothes, except I couldn’t. Sick stared down at the main lobby, not at me, but at the three new guests of the hotel. His green eyes were laser focused and his normally calm demeanor was anything other than calm.

The three ladies turned and looked up. Something flashed between them, a certain knowing or experience because the three of them took a fighting stance. Lynn’s face began to shift as her skin bubbled. Her skin took on a greenish gray color as tentacles burst out from the lower portion of her face. They hung and writhed as she let out a wet, gurgling growl.

Amber took a stance, her yellow cloak opening and two arcane short swords appearing, one in each hand. Shadows continued to

cover her expression, but her yellow eyes blazed with power as she stood at the ready.

Nora made strange arcane hand gestures before she turned into two and multiplied into four. The four identical images stuck out their right hand and twisted their wrists. An arcane dagger slid into her waiting palm and finders coiled around the handle.

Silence and dread filled the lobby and the top of the stairs. I didn't completely understand what was happening, but since Sick is a supernatural hero, I could only assume they had met before.

I bent my legs and leapt over the counter. I cleared it easily as I landed on the floor between the gazes of the three women and Sick at the top of the stairs. I put my hands out, one pointed at the trio and the other pointed up at Sick.

"No violence in the hotel!" I shouted with authority.

The three women seemed to catch themselves. Lynn's tentacles pulled back into her face and her skin returned to normal. The multiple images of Nora slid back into her form, and she put the dagger in her suit jacket. Amber pulled her short swords into her cloak as it came around her shoulders. She bowed her head and didn't look up.

Sick looked down with knowing green eyes. "Mr. Ferryman, do you know you have three villains in your hotel?"

I turned to Sick, "I know. There are certain things happening behind the scenes and these three ladies are under my protection."

The green zombie superhero turned his gaze to me. "Are you sure you are not being tricked? The three behind you have performed many crimes and manipulated untold amounts of people."

Sick turned his gaze back to the three women, "Never mind the many murders they performed and souls they have collected for their dark master."

"Stay out of this! It doesn't concern you!" Lynn shouted.

“The peace and safety of Urth concerns me,” Sick said with a low, dark tone.

“We should settle this before we become the good guys,” Nora said with a hint of preferred violence in her tone.

I shook my head. “No, there will be no fighting in my hotel!”

I turned my gaze to Sick, “We can talk about a few things, but for now, these ladies need to be brought to their room. Can you wait down here until I come back?”

Sick eyed me and his gaze flickered to three women. He turned his gaze back to me and gave a small nod.

I turned to Lynn, “Do you have the keys?”

Lynn nodded and lifted her hand with the three keys.

“Follow me,” I ordered and made for the stairs.

Sick moved to one side of the stairs and started taking them down. Lynn, Amber, and Nora stepped in line behind me and followed me up the stairs.

The stairs creaked as bodies moved up and down the stairs. Sick stared at the three women with unblinking eyes. The trio of ladies stared at him with annoyed or amused eyes. Amber was all smiles under her hood as she stared daggers at the green zombie.

I was a little nervous. I didn’t want a hero of mine duking it out with three weird ladies in my hotel lobby. The Spirit Tribune would have a field day. I just had to get them upstairs and then I could come back down and have an excuse to have a chat with a superhero.

Sick reached the bottom of the stairs when me and the ladies reached the top. I led them along while glancing downstairs to see Sick turn away and walked toward the bar.

I led the three women down the west wing corridor. They had become quiet as they looked around. I brought them to the door that

led to the penthouse and Lynn pushed one key into the keyhole. The door unlocked and opened slightly.

I looked at the three guests with a no-nonsense gaze. “Remember what we discussed. If you want my protection and for me to put in a good word with my boss, follow the rules. Do we understand each other?”

Lynn stepped closer and looked directly into my eyes. “Crystal clear,” she winked.

I nodded and watched as Lynn turned and took the stairs up. Amber was next, her hooded head low and not looking at me. Nora was last, following the others. I watched them take the stairs up, Nora glancing back at me. She stared at me for a moment before following the others.

I closed the door shut behind them and let out a small exhale. I understood that the three of them and the item they were carrying were very important, but since there seemed to be a history between them and a hero of mine, it did make all this much more difficult. I wanted the Sisterhood envoy to get here already so I could unload them and their cursed item.

There was a tension in the air I didn’t like, like when you eat a bad burrito, and you know you were going to pay later. I mean really pay, like leaking molten lava from a certain orifice and grunting like an animal from a primeval forest. It’s never pretty and the smell would make other forest animals gag or fall over, dead.

I raced back down the corridor and to the stairs. I practically slid down the steps and hopped onto the main floor. I calmed myself as I walked over to the bar archway and stepped in.

The place was empty, except for Sick sitting at a small table with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. I glanced over at the bar and saw a stack of soul pennies on it, gently glowing in the dim light.

“It would have been rude to take a drink and not pay for it,” Sick smiled.

I smiled as I walked over and sat in the seat opposite from him. Sick lifted a green hand, took hold of the bottle, and poured two inches of whiskey into each glass.

I was never much of a drinker when I was alive. The sweet intoxication of burritos was my medicine. But since death has changed everything about me and my previous life, it seemed like a prerequisite to drink yourself silly in the afterlife. Who was I to argue with facts? I was something of a bullshit artist myself.

Of course, I could not say any of this out loud. I was having a drink with a hero. I would be an idiot to let this chance go.

Sick held up his glass and I held up mine. We clinked glasses before taking a small sip from our drinks.

“I must apologize. My instincts got the better of me,” Sick said with a genuine tone.

“It’s okay. I understand the knee jerk reaction to kick ass in the name of justice,” I said and immediately regretted it.

Sick smirked. “After what happened with the Grimm and the rogue witch angel, I can see your dedication to justice and the light. I should have trusted you and will not make that mistake again.”

“It’s cool. It’s all cool,” I said and mentally berated myself. What’s wrong with me? It feels like I was the uncool kid sitting with a cool older kid in the lunchroom. I pictured Lydia coming in and seeing me male crush on Sick before she demanded my lunch money. Again, what’s wrong with me?

Sick’s smirk faded away and a shadow touched his green eyes. “Do you know who those three women are?”

I blinked. “Villains?” I said and hoped it was enough.

Sick nodded. “Not just any villains. They often went by the name, The Abomination Girls.”

Memories crashed into me like a horde of wild hogs attacking a barbeque. When I was alive, I didn’t just play video games. When I

wasn’t playing video games or working, I kept tabs on the superhero world that was always in the news. Spiral City was the hub for many of the conflicts, and sometimes spilled into other places along Urth. Everyone had their favorite heroes or villains they followed. Sick was one of them because of how different he was. I didn’t like the shiny and super good heroes. I liked the ones that got down and dirty. I followed the supernatural heroes because they tended to be more grounded.

I looked down at my drink as I remembered the Abomination Girls. I saw their misadventures on TV. They often left broken families, graffiti, and empty husks in their wake. They liked mayhem and destruction. The news only spoke about their crimes and showed grainy videos and pictures of them. The news never mentioned their motives, only that they were very dangerous.

Sick took another sip before he continued, “I know it’s not common knowledge, but the Abomination Girls functioned a lot like many other groups of villains. There are many cults and organizations devoted to spreading darkness and evil. Those three women follow a dark god that goes by the name, Draygon.

“Draygon is a lesser eldritch god. He deals with madness, illusions, and the dead. He and his followers enjoy spreading mayhem and chaos. When Urth has had visitors from other realms, they speak to Draygon’s influence. They have dug in deep, keeping to the shadows and whispering their intentions to the gullible and ignorant. They promise being part of a dark family, but it’s a manipulation tactic to get those with little or nothing to go beyond their normal lives to make a ripple for the dark god.”

Sick looked away as he held his glass. “You never forget the haunted look in people’s eyes as they wake up from their dark dream and realize they killed people or caused many people to suffer in Draygon’s wake. He promises something many people desire, a sense of belonging.”

“I wouldn’t let them stay here if my boss didn’t tell me too. Samhain told me it is important they stay here,” I said in a low tone.

“Can I tell you a secret?”

Sick nodded. “I would be honored to keep your secret.”

I smiled. He was honored! Swoon.

“They are defecting from their god and want to join Samhain,” I said.

Sick nodded. “This is good news if they are speaking the truth. The Abomination Girls have on more than one occasion pleaded their innocence and turned around to create great destruction.”

“I’m sure Nyx and I can keep them in line,” I said with a drop of confidence. Remembering the Abomination Girl’s past exploits, they might be a bigger problem than I anticipated.

Sick smiled, showing me greenish teeth. “If you don’t mind, I would like to be part of the hotel’s security detail. It would be wrong if I didn’t help keep an eye on them, in the best interest of everyone staying here.”

My eyes widened and my mouth twitched as I tried to not grin. I was getting a chance to work side by side with a superhero! That was the coolest thing ever! I never thought in my entire life I’d ever work with people who tried to do great things. It was surreal, weird, and totally fucking cool.

“Uh, yeah man. We can totally work together,” I said, trying to play it off. Deep down inside, I was jumping up and high fiving my imaginary best friend, who strangely looked like Sick.

I was living the best afterlife ever!

Eight

Secret Missions

There was a tapping, a terrible tapping at my chest. It caused the dreamscape to pull away as the terrible tapping continued. I wanted to shout out “Nevermore!” but I wasn’t fully awake. Instead, I drifted up, closer to reality as I scrambled to swim back down into my dreams. The tapping continued, unabated as I shouted in my fleeing dreams, “Nevermore!”

Eyelids fluttered as the tapping continued. I noticed a bright light with a shadow in the middle of it. My gaze fell into focus as I stared at Nyx’s serious expression. She was against me, her finger tapping at my chest. It was very annoying.

“Did you do the deed?” Nyx said as I felt her naked body pressed against me, but for some reason, she was wearing her bent witch hat.

I blinked the last drops of sleep away and looked at her like she was a crazy person. “You can stop tapping now.”

Nyx stopped tapping but kept her curiously stern gaze on me. “Spill the beans!”

I sighed. “No beans to spill. The Abomination Girls are in the penthouse and Sick said he would help with security while they’re here.”

Nyx’s eyes narrowed. “Not that. I’m talking about Vanessa. Did you pump her for information? Did you ride with her toward the truth? Did you break her spirit into small whimpers and moans?”

There it was. My current girlfriend was trying to find out anything she could with my future girlfriend. Not that I was sure Vanessa would also be my girlfriend. I didn’t want to make any assumptions. Vanessa is beautiful and has a light spirit, but I wasn’t going to force anyone into anything. Nyx on the other hand, seemed very eager.

“No,” I said simply.

Nyx jabbed a finger at my chest. “Why not?”

“Hold on, you teased me for a while before we became the monster with two backs. What’s the rush with Vanessa?”

Nyx let out a giggle. “It’s okay when I do it to you. It’s not the same with everyone else.”

I barked out a laugh. “Why are the crazy ones so damned sexy?”

“Because we’re crazy,” Nyx grinned.

I sat up and Nyx sat up with me. I tried to not look at her perfect breasts, but their power was too much.

Nyx grabbed at her own breasts, squeezing them as she spoke to me, “With the Abomination Girls here, the envoy will arrive in the next few days. We need to know what to expect so we can prepare ahead of time and make sure nothing goes wrong.”

“Why are you doing that?” I asked as I watched her massage her own breasts.

“I’m not doing anything,” Nyx said as she continued.

“Yes, you are,” I said sternly.

Nyx continued as if she didn’t hear me, “The sun is up, and you have to get downstairs to train Vanessa. I’ll speak with Lydia and Sick about security. We may have to prepare a room for the meeting and handing over the item.”

I finally broke my gaze from Nyx’s creamy breasts and looked up into her mischievous eyes. “Lynn showed me the item. It’s called the Eye of Thull.”

Nyx stopped massaging herself and let her hands drop onto her lap. Her playfulness melted away and her orange-colored eyes glowed with dim supernatural power.

“Now I know why this is so important to the boss. The Eye of Thull is a cursed item that can easily turn the tide in any battle or conflict. It’s one of Draygon’s favorite artifacts to move among his

followers. If the Sisterhood can safely lock it away, it will deal a hard blow to Draygon's power."

"I only got the cliff notes on Draygon. Is he that much of a problem?"

Nyx gave a slow nod. "Draygon enjoys chaos and corruption. It is his purpose. He also enjoys illusions, manipulation, and lots of blood. He has been a thorn in everyone's side for a long time."

"Sick and I talked about the Abomination Girls last night. He said they're supernatural super villains and have lied, cheated, and caused general chaos for many years. He said he fought them on several occasions. I can't help but think that the Abomination Girls might be manipulating this situation for their dark lord?"

Nyx sat back with her hands and arms propping her up. She looked to the side as memories played out in her eyes.

"Sick might be right. I've fought the Abomination Girls twice, with some help. We made them retreat both times, but not before they killed dozens of innocent people in the process. From what you've told me about what the boss said to you, yes, they would be taken and imprisoned for their crimes, but the Eye of Thull is too valuable to let go."

I scratched at the back of my head. "If it's so valuable, someone, or many someone's, are going to come here. It's not a coincidence the gunman showed up at the Night Market."

Nyx nodded. "We have to be extra careful. But in the meantime, you need to break in the new employee."

Nyx reached under the blanket and took hold of my manhood. She began slowly stroking it as it was already hard, ready for morning calisthenics.

"But first, let's help your soldier with a morning one gun salute," Nyx grinned with that crazy look in her eyes.

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I walked to the stairs and looked over the railing at the lobby. The jukebox was playing some easy tunes and Vanessa was already behind the counter. She was wearing a flowery blue and white dress. The collar rose to the midpoint of her neck and from what I could see, the hem of the dress was down to her ankles. The dress fit her figure perfectly, and I couldn't help but notice how much it pressed her ample bosom to her chest, like she was in a torture corset. It cinched at her waist, and my knee jerk reaction was to think it only enhanced her beauty. I didn't think I was shallow, but if I was, I'd think she was hiding her rather nice figure.

Vanessa looked up at me as I reached the stairs, her smile bright with the morning light.

"Good morning!" Vanessa beamed.

"Morning! I said with an enthusiastic smile as I took each step down.

"Sorry for starting so early. I was just excited to start my new job," Vanessa said as I came down and reached the lobby floor.

"No, it's fine. I suppose we should get an early start," I said as I came around the lobby desk and stood beside her.

"I already wiped down the desk and checked out a few guests. I couldn't open the lockbox to put in the soul pennies, so they're just under the counter in that small sack."

I glanced at the shelf under the counter and sure enough, there was a sack beside the lockbox.

I did have to give her access, but since this is her first day, should I give her a few days or right away? I mean, I barely knew her, but she showed her true self when she fought off Hilda and helped Lydia. I mean, I could take away her access if she acted weird. I mean, she could clean us out and be on a train to Southvale before any of us found out? Why can't things be simple!

"Did you know there is an office right behind us?" Vanessa said.

I blinked. "What?"

Vanessa smiled and nodded. She moved to the wall behind the lobby desk. She stepped over and stood by the edge of the mirror behind the lobby desk and ran her fingers along the waist high wood trim along the wall. Her fingers touched something just out of sight and there was a click.

I watched as a secret door opened beside the mirror. Vanessa grabbed the edge and opened it wide. I stepped over and looked in. Inside, there were a few desks, old fashioned file cabinets, and a large alcove in the back with a bigger desk and old wooden chair. There were no windows and old lights hung from the ceiling.

Vanessa peered in. “I was proactive in cleaning off the dust and sweeping the floor. It’s a nice office and I assume; this is where we can do some of our paperwork.”

I simply stared at the room. Yes, it seemed like the perfect place to hide away and do some paperwork. How many secret places does the hotel have?

“Vanessa, I have to ask, how did you find this?”

Vanessa nodded. “The Sisterhood castle, Stormholme, has many secret rooms and chambers. It was an unofficial game the sisters would play, trying to find a secret chamber no one had found in a long time. It helped pass the time, since the island was very boring.”

Vanessa blinked as she saw my blank expression. “I’m sorry! You have no idea what I’m talking about.”

I smiled. “It’s okay. I’m very interested to learn about where you came from. The Sisterhood sounds fascinating.”

Vanessa’s eyes took in a sad edge. “You’d think so, but after a few months, the excitement and fascination wear away until you wake up and discover you’re nothing more than a soldier in a supernatural war.”

I saw my chance and decided to go for it.

I stepped back and leaned against the counter with my best, understanding face. “Want to talk about it?”

Vanessa looked up to me and I knew she could see I was very interested. She closed the secret door and turned to me. She glanced at the stairs and then to the bar. No one was around and the hotel was silent as a tomb.

The banshee looked away. “I want to talk about it, but I’m afraid you might judge me harshly.”

“Considering how many kinds of peoples and their sordid histories come through here, I’m sure your story will not be that strange, or off-putting. I swear I will never think it strange, considering I’m a witch angel who beats up ghosts and monsters.”

“You’re more than that,” Vanessa said with the brightest smile I had ever seen.

Time to reel in some intel.

“So, what was it like?” I asked.

Vanessa’s smile dimmed, but she kept her gaze on me. “I don’t want to be a bore, but the Sisterhood wasn’t as exciting as I thought it would be when I first arrived. I think I should tell you some history first.”

Vanessa’s eyes shined in the morning light. “I died just when I started to live. I grew up kind of sheltered. I never hated my parents. They are good people but were over cautious with my upbringing. I knew I wanted my own adventures since I was very young. I knew my parents had a hard time with that, so I behaved as a good daughter to help them not stress.

“When I was eighteen, I left home to go to college. My parents were distraught, but understood I had to be out on my own. I was so excited; I couldn’t think about anything else. I left for college in Southvale. I wanted to learn and be close to the portal that opened to the elf realm. It was such a magical time.”

Vanessa's eyes darkened a little as she continued, "I had my own little apartment, not far from the college. Once I was settled in, I went out every night to explore Southvale Harbor. It was such a new and amazing experience; I didn't look for the darker elements in the world. It had been only a month since I moved to Southvale and one night I was followed home after picking up some takeout."

I watched as a dead pain filled Vanessa's features. "Vanessa, we don't…" I began.

"No, it's okay. In Stormholme, my sisters always talked about their pasts. It helped to bring us closer and understand our histories.

"I barely got past the door when the stranger charged in after me. I never had a chance to close the door before I was knocked to the floor. Their face was covered but considering how he was breathing and how hard he tried to get me inside, I instantly knew what he was going to do."

Vanessa looked down. "So, I did what anyone would do, I fought. He overpowered me and knocked me to the floor. He grabbed at my shirt and ripped it. I saw his neck and bit him so hard, I still remember the taste of his blood as it spurted in my mouth. He yelled before pulling away and pulled a gun from his jacket. I barely had time to sit up when he shot me in the chest.

"All that was left was darkness for a time. I felt myself slowly dying, but I couldn't see or do anything. I felt the last of my life leak away and I was more upset that my family would find out that I died. There was a sharp pain, like something was forced back into my chest. I woke up to see a banshee in my hospital room.

"She quickly explained that I was chosen to be part of a special order, meant to stop injustice and make the world a better place. She took my hand and we both flew out of the hospital window, into the night sky."

Vanessa smiled as she relived her memory. "I was taken to a special location so I could adjust. I was told I was a new member of the Sisterhood and was welcomed with open arms.

“There are three official titles in the Sisterhood, Sister, Mother, and Queen Mother. All new members were called sisters. Mothers are the elite sisters who have proved their power and dedication to the Sisterhood. There has only been one Queen Mother, the first of us. She continues to reside in Stormholme, directing us on our missions and duties.

“Stormholme is an ancient castle on Gray Rock Isle. It has stood for thousands of years and is home to the Sisterhood. The castle is very large and some of it has fallen into disrepair. My sisters and I, when we were not performing our duties or training, would often explore the castle. We found many unused and secret rooms. We started to keep count, trying to see who could find more.

“When we weren’t looking for secret rooms, sometimes we would visit the vaults deep underground.”

Vanessa gave me a shy smirk. “I think I remember telling you about holding Excalibur. It’s where I developed my love and appreciation for swords.”

I kept my face stony blank, resisting the urge to make a sword joke. I think my resistance may have earned me a burrito later.

Vanessa’s eyes closed halfway as she looked at me. “Swords are so much fun to handle.”

My eyes widened a hair. Did she just make a sword joke? Was she flirting with me or was I imagining it? I became hyper cautious because this was one of those rare moments when one misstep could be a huge turn off or turn on, I think. Honestly, I wasn’t some Don Juanito with the ladies. I think I hit the lotto with Nyx and Mara, but this was a step higher and dangerous, only because I can’t say no to a beautiful woman. And to be clear, beautiful means beauty on the inside and outside. I’ve seen a lot of beautiful women with ugly personalities and that has always been a huge turn off for me. As for women with beautiful insides and not so beautiful outsides, everyone looks the same in the dark.

Vanessa seemed to catch herself and looked away with shy eyes. I was about to tell her everything was okay when the phone rang by the front desk.

“Should I get it?” Vanessa asked.

“I got it,” I smiled as I walked over to the old-fashioned phone and lifted it up.

I pulled the receiver from the cradle and spoke into it. “Coffin Hotel,” I said.

The line was silent for a moment before someone coughed and began speaking.

“Hi, yes, hello. I was inquiring about renting out the ballroom for a convention? Our last place canceled our request and we have been trying to find a new venue on short notice.”

I looked down at the empty lobby desk. “The schedule looks clear. What day and how many people are expected to attend?”

The voice on the other hand made some muffled sounds. I assumed he was speaking to others. The chatter continued for a full minute before the person on the other end began speaking to me.

“We have about fifty people who need rooms and others will be coming to the location.”

“I think we can accommodate you. What day?”

“Tomorrow, and it will last three nights,” the man said and let the words hang in the air.

Dammit! I hate last second reservations. The hotel was going to turn into a zoo.

“Yeah, we can do that. You will need to drop off a deposit and I’ll need a name. What kind of convention is it?”

“We are hopping in a car right now. Should be there in a little bit. My name is Barry Burns. I’ll give all the details when we arrive. Thanks!” Barry said quickly and hung up.

I pulled the receiver back and looked at it. Barry must be desperate if he's coming here right now to lock this in. Whatever. The hotel was a little dead and we needed to keep the soul pennies coming in.

I hung up the phone and turned to Vanessa. "It looks like we will have a surprise convention on our hands."

"I can speak with Mara and see if we need to make another supply order? Afterwards, I can inspect the ballroom and get it ready," Vanessa said with enthusiastic flair.

I couldn't hide my smile. "Sure. Barry Burns is on his way here to secure the deposit. I'll wait for him before joining you on fixing the ballroom."

"Sounds like a plan," Vanessa smiled before turning away.

I reached out and touched her shoulder. Vanessa turned her head and looked at me with curious eyes.

"I very much want to hear the rest of your story," I said with a warm tone.

Vanessa eyed me and smiled. "Can we talk over drinks?"

I smiled. "It will have to be here at the Sanctuary, if you're okay with that?"

"I am, and I was going to suggest the bar here. Can't drink too far from work," Vanessa beamed.

For a small moment, there was an invisible connection between us. My spirit senses were going crazy, and I wasn't sure it was because there was a vibe between us, OR THERE WAS A VIBE BETWEEN US.

"I better go check with Mara. Be right back," Vanessa said before turning and walking for the corridor behind the stairs.

I watched her go and my heart was doing a little pitter patter in my chest. I sensed a presence and looked at the second-floor railing.

Nyx was leaning forward on her elbows against the railing. She looked down with a knowing grin and gave me a thumb's up.

"How long were you up there?" I shouted to her.

"Long enough to know someone wants to handle your sword," Nyx winked.

"Jealous?" I asked, knowing the answer already.

Nyx let out a haughty laugh. "She might be a swordswoman, but will she let you call her mommy in the middle of the night?"

"It was spur of the moment! We were having fun!" I laughed.

"Okay, Daddy. You can spurt in the moment anytime you want," Nyx laughed.

I was about to go around the counter, run up the stairs and give Nyx a royal spanking when the front doors to the hotel opened. I turned my attention to the doors as they swung closed and a man in white shirt and black pants walked toward me.

I was momentarily stunned by how good looking the guy was. I'm not into guys, but damn, this guy looked like he walked out of a fashion magazine. He had dirty blonde hair. It was short and wavy, moving to his every step. His face looked like it was carved by ugly people who know what handsome beauty is. He had a slim build but looked fit enough to run a triathlon. His face was smooth, like he couldn't grow a beard to save his life. He had piercing green eyes and a smile that could disarm a robber in a bank.

I couldn't form any words as he approached the counter and never broke eye contact.

"Greetings friend! I was hoping you can assist me with setting up a secret event?" the man said, his voice gentle with an edge of fun.

I blinked. "Barry Burns?"

The man smiled and shook his head. "You must be mistaken. My name is Aithen Dove, from the Valis Realm. I have to hold a secret training session and thought the Coffin Hotel would be perfect for it."

What the hell was going on?

The six feet one-inch-tall man smiled with perfect teeth. “Do you think the Coffin Hotel can accommodate us?”

“Uh, it depends. Someone just called to set up their convention here at the hotel. Um, you said you were from the Valis Realm?”

Aithen nodded. “You’re not familiar with us? Let me have the honor of explaining it to you. Our realm has been quiet for some time. We had to rebuild much of our realm after some dreadful business with an eldritch god rampaging through it. It was about ten years ago when the god was forced back to the Dark Sun Realm, but we can talk more about that over drinks.

“Valis is a mighty realm keeping the peace between many realms. Much like your god, Samhain, we of Valis help keep chaos at bay. There aren’t too many of us and only recently have our numbers reached a point sufficient enough to return to policing the realms.

“Such an undertaking requires special training. Training that requires us to be in the thick of it, learning and utilizing any and all we can learn. There is no evil in our realm, so we are having our training program here at the Coffin Hotel. The place is ripe with darkness. I can feel it.”

“Um, wow, that’s a lot to take in,” I said as I scratched my head.

“Do not fret, my friend. We only wish to train and experience on the property for the next three days and nights. After that, we will be on our way back to Valis. I can already tell you’re a good person and I promise to give the hotel 5 stars.”

I wasn’t sure what to think. Aithen came off like he had a lot of knowledge, but he spoke to me like the dorky kid in school who was half cool and half, well, dorky.

“How many people do you expect for this training?” I asked.

“Forty-two, secret to life! Ha ha!” Aithen boomed.

Dammit, I take it back. He was cool in a weird way.

“Brandon, it’s Holly. If they're having a secret training, I can create a large room in the West Wing?”

“Thank you, Holly. I think that will work.”

“We can accommodate your training,” I smiled.

“Excellent!” Aithen’s eyes shined with genuine energy.

Aithen pulled out a small sack from his pocket and placed it on the counter. “I believe this may be enough, but if you need more, I’ll bring back more.”

I opened the sack and saw it was filled with soul pennies. “It’s enough for a down payment.”

Aithen nodded. “We weren’t sure how many were needed. We don’t use soul pennies, but we do have a lot of them. After I go back and give the good news, I will bring back more.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how did you get here?”

Aithen smiled. “By the forest in the back of the hotel. We know all the nexus points on Valis and where to take them. It’s nice to visit the Urth realm again. Our people haven’t been this way in over a hundred years.”

A nagging question stabbed at me. “You said it was a secret training, but you told me right away. Is it really that secret?”

Aithen’s smile dimmed a little. “I must apologize. I keep forgetting that secret means not telling anyone else what the secret is. We don’t keep secrets on Valis. Honesty is the best policy and cuts through to the quick. I must remember to keep the secret training secret.”

I glanced up at the top of the stairs and Nyx was long gone. I turned back to Aithen and leaned forward over the counter a little.

“I’m good with secrets. If you tell me more about your training, maybe I can help?”

Aithen looked to one side and then another. He turned to me and leaned forward.

“Good to know there are others in this realm who know how to keep secrets. I’m part of WOKE, Warrior Organization of Kind Enlightenment. We are Valis white operations, or white ops for short. We are a new and spunky organization. We know we can’t simply rush into areas of evil and darkness and expect everyone to tell us what they are doing.

“WOKE members must learn how to infiltrate gangs, covens, cults, and evil organizations to gain valuable intelligence before taking them down. That means learning how to deceive, lie, and curse like most evildoers.”

I simply nodded. I could already tell Aithen was eager, but completely naïve to how secret organizations work. I mean, he is part of a group that is the opposite of black ops but wants to do black ops missions. Part of me wanted to laugh and yet, another part wanted to help this poor, innocent dude.

“Hey man, I get it. Don’t worry. Your secret's safe with me. I’ll set up your rooms and your training rooms by this evening.”

Aithen’s eyes glittered in excitement. “Thank you, kind hotel manager!”

“My name is Brandon Ferryman,” I smiled.

“Of course, how rude of me. Thank you, Mr. Ferryman. I will have my people arrive by this evening and…” Aithen was cut off by the front door swinging open.

We both looked over to the front door as several men in black robes walked in. They rushed to the counter edge, one of them nearly crashing into it.

“I’m here!” the robed man said in a huff.

“Barry Burns?” I asked, not sure if it was him or someone else off the street looking to run a convention.

The hooded man nodded. “That’s me. Thanks for waiting. I have the payment ready!”

Barry hefted a large sack of soul pennies up and dropped it on the counter. It was much bigger than Aithen’s sack of pennies.

I glanced at Aithen and he was looking at the black robed Barry with suspicious eyes.

“I think everything is in order. I just need to know the name and purpose of your convention?”

Barry glanced at Aithen and then back to me. “Can I write it down and give it to you?”

Aithen let out a small laugh and looked at me. “I’ll take my leave, Mr. Ferryman. I shall return this evening. Thank you for the hospitality.”

I watched as Aithen walked away from the front desk and passed the small group of black robed guys and gals standing around.

When Aithen was gone, Barry let out a relieved sigh. “Sorry, I didn't want to chance losing our place. People get weird when there is a necromancer convention.”

Necromancer convention?

Barry continued, “The name of the convention is the Recyclers Convention. We used to go by Late Healers convention, but it often brought up more questions. Every Necromancer in Northvale is coming to this convention, and we had to shift venues because the hotel in Shroud Point found out about who we are and canceled our reservation at the last moment. He complained that the Shroud Point cemetery was recently emptied out and thought we were responsible, which we were not!”

Oh, yeah, heh heh, they got the blame for what the Grimm did. Better keep that under my hat.

“Anyway, thanks for hosting us. We recyclers have been unfairly treated because we enjoy learning about necromancy. We exchange knowledge and spells for a greater understanding of death magic. We are not evil, only misunderstood.”

“Yeah, people can be so narrow minded,” I said.

Barry nodded. “Exactly. Now that everything is in order, guests should be arriving in the next few hours. We will take our room keys now and inspect the space. You don’t know any available DJ’s, do you?”

I smiled. “If you don’t mind a demon, DJ Horns might be available. I can give him a call?”

Barry grinned as shadows covered his eyes. “That would be fantastic! Please do call him and there will be more soul pennies where that came from.”

“Will do. Let’s just finalize your rooms and we can get started,” I said when the phone rang.

“Excuse me,” I said as I moved to the phone and picked up the receiver.

“Hello? Hello?” said a somewhat familiar voice.

“Yes?” I asked.

“Hi! We need room service. Send several bottles of liquor to the penthouse. Only the good stuff.”

“Lynn, we don’t have room service,” I said with a bored tone.

“What kind of hotel is this?” she demanded.

“The kind that doesn’t have room service yet,” I said with an annoyed tone.

“We’ll, since I have you on the line, if you smell smoke, it’s okay. We have it under control.”

“Wait, smoke?” I said as my heart began thudding in my chest.

“Yeah. If you’re coming up, bring some liquor,” Lynn laughed and hung up on me.

Dammit! Can I be held accountable for killing my own guests? I don’t know, but I was about to find out.

Nine

Bad Moon Rising

I didn't bother to knock as I slid the extra key into the lock. Wild thoughts whipped at me as I pulled the door open hard enough for it to shudder after it swung into the wall. I bounded up the stairs and leapt about ten feet into the air. I scanned the room as gravity pulled me down, chaos writhing like a beached octopus.

Amber, the yellow cloaked woman, was sitting on the floor in the middle of the penthouse. Shadows covered her face, except for her yellow eyes, as she looked at flames dancing in a wastebasket. She stared at it like she was possessed.

Loud music blared throughout the penthouse. I turned my gaze as I fell, seeing Nora headbanging and her top hat still glued to her head. She air-guitared and stuck out her tongue as she listened to a heavy metal station. The speakers by the small radio and CD player were pulsing and vibrating enough for them to dance from their original places.

I landed on the floor and turned to my left, seeing Lynn with a half-bottle of vodka in her hand and wearing a hotel robe. She was laughing and pointing at me before taking another swig from the bottle. The front of her robe was open, showing that she was wearing her jeans, but she was topless. The robe was enough to cover her nipples, barely. Her whole body trembled as she laughed and drank.

"What. The. Hell?" I shouted through the noise.

My words did next to nothing as the three abomination girls continued like it was a pregame for a frat party.

"Our guardian has arrived!" Lynn cackled and took another swig.

Nora jumped up and down to the music. Amber didn't move, caught in the hypnotic power of the flames in the wastebasket.

I charged over to the sink and grabbed a big glass. I filled it with water as Lynn moved to my side.

“You look familiar,” Lynn laughed.

I ignored her as I filled the glass and strode back to Amber. I dumped the glass of water in the wastebasket and the flames went out with a hard hiss.

“Oh no,” Amber said and bowed her head to the extinguished flames.

I charged over to Nora as she jumped around like she was at a concert. I pointed a finger at the power button, ready to press it when a snake reared up from behind the radio and flashed its fangs.

“I’m still listening to that,” Nora said matter of fact.

I growled as my hand shot forward and grabbed the snake by the throat. Its eyes bulged before it disappeared. I kept my fingers curled into fist and slammed it down on the radio so hard, it shattered into hundreds of pieces.

The music died as Nora’s shoulders slumped at her sides.

I turned and faced the three of them with rage in my eyes.

“What part of keeping a low profile do the three of you not understand!” I growled.

Lynn sauntered toward me as Nora and Amber simply blinked.

“There’s low profile and then there is being dead,” Lynn smirked as she stepped in front of me.

“We may be dead, but the party will never stop,” Lynn grinned and took a swig from her bottle.

“I thought you wanted more drinks?” I said with hard eyes.

Lynn nodded. “I found this bottle tucked away, but this is barely enough to get my motor running. Did you bring more?”

“No,” I said plainly.

Lynn leaned forward and into me, pressing her large chest against mine and her eyes gleaming with sultry desire.

“There are other ways to get our motor going,” Lynn said with vodka breath touching my nose.

“I have a hotel to run and to make sure you three are protected. Do I have to have someone stationed here with you?”

“If you’re staying with us, we might behave. Or we could be punished like the bad little girls we are,” Lynn cooed.

“Lynn, he’s no fun,” Nora smiled.

“I’ll never find out what the flames wanted to tell me,” Amber moaned.

Lynn blinked as she stared at me. “You do seem so familiar,” she said before holding up her other hand over my mouth.

I grabbed her wrist and gently pulled her hand away. “Lynn, I need you all to behave. I don’t know when the Sisterhood envoy will arrive, and the hotel just received a lot of guests. For your protection, stay here and keep it quiet.”

“Or what? You’ll come barging in here again and break our bones like the poor radio?” Lynn said with sarcastic sweetness.

I glared at her for a tiny moment before I smirked. “Or I’ll have Sick babysit the three of you.”

Lynn’s eyes widened and she stepped back. Nora and Amber looked over with wide eyes.

I nodded. “Sick told me about some of your exploits. I also remember some of your adventures from the news. You three are killers and the only reason I’m not burning the three of you into the Soul Wheel is Samhain wants the Eye of Thull.”

I took a step closer to the three of them and they all shrank back a step. “Keep acting like brats and I will chain all three of you up and stuff you in closets until the envoy arrives. Do we understand each other?”

All three stared at me before they lowered their heads. For a brief moment, I thought I was in control, until Nora spoke up.

“We’re sorry. This is hard for us.”

Lynn and Amber nodded.

“We are so used to doing what we wanted, it’s hard to try and act normal,” Lynn said in a low tone. “When you become part of this life, you think there is never enough blood and violence to satisfy your pain. You look for more and more, but the inner pain never goes away.”

Amber spoke next, “Draygon promised us freedom and all the blood, death, and tears we could inflict. It was fun for a long time, but it has since turned to ashes in our mouth. We’re tired of hurting others. We are tired of hurting ourselves.”

Lynn nodded. “It is why we contacted witch angels and Samhain. We want out and we know Draygon will not let us leave without a fight.”

“This is our only path to true freedom, and we are still fucking it up,” Nora added.

Seeing the three of them look remorseful weakened my anger. I couldn’t tell if they were really good liars, or they were telling the truth. Part me wanted to give them the benefit of the doubt, but another part of me wanted to yell at them more. I decided to not yell at them, stupid emotions getting the better of me.

“Samhain will take care of all three of you, as long as you do your part and hand over the Eye of Thull. In the meantime, you three need to stay here and out of sight.”

I pointed at Lynn, “No more rude phone calls for liquor.”

Lynn pouted.

I pointed at Nora, “No loud music.”

“Well, you did destroy the radio,” Nora mentioned before she crossed her arms, looked away, and nodded.

I pointed at Amber, “No more fires!”

“But the flames speak to the voices in my head,” Amber said like a hurt child.

“Amber,” I said with a scathing edge.

The woman in the yellow hooded cloak nodded and bowed her head.

The tension in my shoulders eased as I continued, “We will get through this. But since we have so many guests in the hotel, I will be posting a guard at your door. You can still ring the front desk for anything you need, but the three of you must stay here, got it?”

“Yes, Mr. Ferryman,” the three abomination girls said like scolded junior high kids.

“I’m going to head back downstairs. I’ll talk to Mara and see if she can bring some beer up with your next meal.”

The trio’s eyes lit up.

I gave them one last, stern look before turning to the stairs and making my way down. My senses were giving me strange vibrations, like I could tell they were telling the truth, but tendrils of shadows and darkness kept interfering with their auras. Maybe they were trying harder, but their old life kept smacking them in the head. Or maybe they were bullshitting me and were going to act up the moment I left. Either way, I couldn’t let them distract me too much. I did have a hotel to run.

When I reached the bottom of the stairs and stepped out onto the second floor, Sick and Lydia were waiting for me. Lydia had a fire extinguisher in her hands and Sick looked like he was ready to charge upstairs if I told him to.

“I think I got it handled and the fire is out,” I said.

“I could shoot them with the fire extinguisher, for good measure,” Lydia said with a stern expression.

“No, not now at least. They are confined to the penthouse until a special envoy arrives. They should be on their best behavior, I hope.”

Sick nodded. “With your permission, I can stay here on this floor and guard them.”

I smiled. “That would be great. I mentioned your name as someone who would watch over them and they were a little scared. You might be perfect to keep them in line.”

“We have fought on several occasions, and they know I will not hold back to stop them.”

“I can relieve you a few times out of the day and night. I don’t need to sleep much,” Lydia said with a monotone voice.

“That would be appreciated,” Sick smiled, showing his green teeth.

I turned to Lydia, “We are going to have a lot of guests coming in over the next few hours. We should put together a security schedule anyway. There are going to be a lot of necromancers and people from Valis here.”

“Valis?” Sick said. “Angels are staying here?”

The people from Valis are angels? That sort of explains Aithen’s weird innocence. He acted like he was born yesterday. If he and the other people he is bringing are angels, they will be able to provide better security and I won’t have to pay them a single penny. Score one for me saving soul pennies!

“Yeah, and hopefully their presence will calm everyone down. I don’t want a repeat of the Collector’s Convention. We do this by the book. Take care of the guests, provide security, and shut down any evil crap. Let’s get to work,” I smirked.

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The day fell into controlled chaos. People in black robes showed up in groups to get their rooms. Intermingled with the necromancers, people who were much too good looking, arrived in batches.

Vanessa and I worked like two dancers in sync behind the counter, signing in names and handing over keys.

Nyx was often in the lobby, helping guests by guiding them to their rooms. The jukebox played on as bodies moved and a tinge of excitement touched the air.

After many hours and the sun moving across the sky to touch the horizon, the crowds ebbed, and a small relief touched my spirit. I handed a key to a black-robed woman, and she scurried off. I took a step back and leaned against the wall with the mirror. Vanessa did the same a few feet to my right and we both let out a sigh of relief. We weren't physically tired, but we were both mentally sapped.

The hotel was full of guests and the next three days were going to be bloody bonkers with a necromancer convention and training seminars for angels.

I looked over to Vanessa and she looked over to me. A warm relief touched her eyes and a small smile crept into her lips. She looked like she was having fun just being involved and it was nice to see. Telling me about her life in the Sisterhood did strike a few chords with me. I understood what it meant to lock yourself away, afraid to live because the moment you step out of your comfort zones, something bad seemed to always happen. Vanessa was free for barely a blink of time and was killed by some random asshole. I left my home to get some air and a burrito and paid for it with my life in a dirty parking lot. We shared a similar experience and I think it spoke to us on a deeper level. Or we were both sad and horny and wanted to bonk our brains out so we could feel something good. You know, life stuff.

"I'm still up for that drink," Vanessa said.

"Me too," I smiled.

We both stood up when Mara came waltzing in with a covered plate and a smile. The blonde zombie girl walked right up to the lobby counter and placed the covered plate down on it.

“I managed to get everything ready and had a few minutes to kill, so I thought I would bring you both something to snack on.”

My heart went pitter patter as Mara grabbed the metal dome covering and lifted it up to reveal two steaming burritos.

“My emotional support burritos! Mara, you shouldn’t have!” I nearly shouted with giddy madness.

Mara smiled and bowed at the hip to me.

Vanessa smiled. “I… can’t eat those,” she said politely.

Mara stood up and turned her attention to Vanessa, keeping her smile. “I know, that is why I brought you a different treat.”

I already had a burrito in my hand and was biting off the end as Mara dug in her apron pocket and pulled out what was either a small rat, or a large mouse.

“I found this out back. I know banshees only consume death energy, so I captured it and brought it to you, keeping it fresh. When you’re finished, I can take the corpse back,” Mara explained.

Vanessa glanced at me. I think she was worried I would think less of her if she killed a rat in front of me. I watched her kill squirrels and didn’t blink. Undead got to eat and all that jazz.

“I’m totally okay with it,” I said after I gulped down a chunk of burrito.

Vanessa’s eyes darkened before her hand lashed out and snatched the rat from Mara’s hand. The little creature let out a horrific whine before Vanessa took hold of its head and bent it at a wrong angle. The creature let out a death rattle as the darkness pulled from Vanessa’s eyes and they turned completely white. I watched as black strands of energy floated up from the cooling corpse in her hands and into her open mouth. Each strand slithered up and past her lips as she inhaled. When the last black strand vanished into her mouth, she closed her lips. White eyes returned to normal, and her features took on a healthy shine.

“Thank you, Mara,” Vanessa said and handed the dead rat to her.

Mara took it and licked her lips. In the next moment, she bit off the head and began chewing. Meat and bone crunched between her teeth for a small moment before she gulped it down. She took another bite and chewed it like she was having a world-famous burrito.

“If you are finished with any other living creatures in the future, let me know and I will take care of the rest,” Mara winked at the banshee.

Vanessa gave a firm nod and smiled.

It’s so nice to see Vanessa and Mara getting along and eating together.

Mara glanced at me and gave me an approving nod. I wondered if she was in on it with Nyx, the two of them trying to push me onto Vanessa, or in her. I didn’t know, but I did know this burrito was amazing.

“I saw Lydia in the corridor. I’ll have her come over and watch the desk,” Mara said as she walked away.

I scooped up my plate with the extra burrito and a half-eaten burrito in my other hand. I pointed with my shoulder to the bar and Vanessa grinned. We both stepped from behind the counter, crossed the small distance, and walked into the Sanctuary Bar.

The place was set up with tables and chairs ready for butts, but we still didn’t have a bartender. I walked over to a table by the window and set down my plate but kept the half-eaten burrito in my hand.

“I can make us a few drinks, if you drink. I never asked if you could drink,” I said.

Vanessa grinned. “Banshees can drink, but we only get drunk off certain drinks. Mead is one of them, but whiskey and ale can get us plastered.”

“So, something light?” I asked, unsure what she wanted to feel at the moment.

Vanessa let out a small laugh. “Whiskey, straight, and bring over the bottle.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” I smiled and made my way to the bar.

I shoved the last of my burrito into my mouth like some mongrel wolf, before grabbing two glasses and a bottle of amber liquid. I stepped out from behind the bar and walked over to Vanessa as she stood by the table. There was a look in her eye that I could only describe as hot for teacher. Or it could have been the intoxicating effects of the burrito. Either way, I think we were going to have a great time.

Vanessa took the glasses from my hand and put them on the table. I was about to pour when she took the bottle from my hand and began pouring into each glass. She filled each glass to the top and set the bottle down. We both sat down, picked up our glasses and clinked them together before gulping down whiskey.

I didn’t know if it was the burrito, the whiskey, Vanessa or all three, but I was super relaxed. Vanessa seemed to loosen up, taking another long sip as she leaned back in her chair. She often held herself prim and proper, but right now, I think she was letting her hair down.

“So good,” Vanessa said and went for a third, long gulp.

I nodded as I glanced at the archway. Beyond it, Lydia stepped behind the front desk and glared at me. When I smiled, she flipped me the finger before leaning back against the wall. I think Lydia approved as well. She usually mouthed the words “fuck you” when she gave me the middle finger.

“I never finished my story,” Vanessa smiled as she held the glass of whiskey to her cheek.

“If it’s too difficult, we don’t have to talk about it. I’m happy to just spend time with you.”

My heart dropped in my chest. Did I just say what I think I said? Did I say those words everyone loves to hear, I'm happy to just spend time with you? That is couple speak and I wasn't sure what was happening between us. It was different with Nyx, she was a freak and had no issues with being herself. Mara was a little shy at first, but quickly wanted to have fun in pound town. Vanessa on the other hand, I thought maybe I had to wine and dine her. She was classy, well-poised, and had a heart of gold. I was taking it slow, despite Nyx pushing me to close the deal and bring her into our family. Fuck it all! Are we starting a family? Are we all seeing each other while we work together? I heard a long time ago that you never date where you work, but this wasn't like any place I had worked. I'm a manager for a supernatural hotel and here I was, having a small date with one of the employees. Was I doing something wrong?

I glanced around to see no one else was around. Nope, no one cares and I'm being an idiot. Back to enjoying the moment!

Vanessa leaned forward a little, her eyes shining in the comfortable light. "I'm happy spending time with you too. But I don't mind talking about it. It's cathartic to get it all out."

I leaned forward a little and sipped my drink as the beautiful banshee across from me continued with her story.

"There isn't much left to tell. I spent years with the Sisterhood, fighting supernatural threats, but spending most of our time waiting around the castle. We were only called in when local heroes and law enforcement couldn't handle it, which wasn't much.

"I spent a lot of downtime looking up the histories of many artifacts held in the vaults. There was a rotating schedule of cataloging items and those were my favorite times. A few others and I often snuck into the deeper vaults to admire some of the more ancient and dangerous items."

Vanessa's eyes took on a faraway gaze. "Despite some of the magic and wonder, it wasn't enough for me. I didn't want to read

about people's adventures, I wanted to live them. When I had that thought, it was the only thing I could think about.

"It was during this time, Hilda contacted me. I didn't know who she was at the time, but she promised me that she would help me escape, if I brought her a certain kind of scroll. I was so desperate to leave for a better life, I listened to her and stole the scroll piece from one of the vaults.

"Then, like the many heroes I read about, I came up with a plan to escape, knowing I was going to be helped when I got out. I had a lot of fun putting the plan together with a few of my trusted sisters. I knew I couldn't fly away, or I would be spotted. So, I had to find another way. I managed to stash away money, a cell phone, and extra clothes. During our outings to stop evil, soul pennies were often laying around. I started to pick them up and hold onto them for safe keeping.

"After months of planning, I managed to save a lot of soul pennies, normal money, and an assortment of clothes. Friends helped with information from the only town on the island. The town was filled with people who knew and guarded the castle for generations. Any of them would have told the mothers in the castle, so I had to be extra careful.

"There was a ferry that left the island for the mainland twice a day. When I was ready, I said goodbye to my friends and snuck out of the castle. I walked through the forests covering the island until I made it to the shore. The sun was going down as I stepped into the water with my pack. Everything inside the pack was wrapped in plastic as I submerged myself and floated toward the ferry boat."

Vanessa looked at me as she took another deep sip. She put her glass down and her eyes nearly glowed from the memory.

"There has always been rumors of banshees losing a taste for our life. Some would complain and others simply disappear. Only the hardest souls can do what we do for a long time. Many times, we

were just scared of true death or wanted to lead normal lives. I knew, I wanted to have adventures I never had while I was alive.

“I clung to the side of the ferry as it slipped through the water, toward the mainland. I can remember how happy I was as saltwater soaked into my robe and drifted alongside the ferry, like a barnacle ready for adventure.”

Vanessa picked up the bottle of whiskey and poured into her glass until it was full. She then poured into my glass until it was full again. She put the bottle down and smiled from ear to ear.

“It took some time, but I managed to make it back to the United Vales of Tylerica. I knew the Sisterhood would come looking for me. There are Sisterhood agents everywhere, especially in the big cities and towns. Hilda promised me soul pennies and a place to stay long term. Northvale is very spread out and not so densely populated. I knew if I was going to hide for a while, it had to be up north. With Hilda’s help, I could start a new life, away from the Sisterhood.

“I already knew about nexus points and how some of them had places where supernatural beings could reside without anyone looking too closely at them. Hilda told me to go to a hotel that just reopened, the Coffin Hotel. I made my way north, passing through Southvale and Eastvale. That is when I arrived here and met you.”

Vanessa held up her glass. “And the rest, as you know, is history,” she said before she drank down the entire contents of her glass.

“Hell of a story and I’m glad you’re here,” I said before I did the same with my glass.

Vanessa put her glass down and picked up the bottle. She poured more into her glass before pouring into mine.

“I knew you were special when you saw me feed and didn’t treat me weird afterwards. I really knew you were special when you shared how much you liked geeky stuff like swords and magical items at the Collector’s Convention,” Vanessa said with a slight lisp.

I think she was getting tipsy. I think I was too, because she and her twin sister were looking really good right now.

“I like swords but holding the Sun Sword was pure magic. I wish I knew the command word to activate it. I would have really put Hilda against the ropes.”

“Do you like tying people up?” Vanessa asked with a sultry edge and half-closed eyes.

“I like lots of things,” I said and mentally slapped myself for saying that. Don Juanito I was not!

“You’re very adventurous. The way you are with Nyx is fun. I like seeing you both together.”

Pink touched Vanessa’s cheeks and her relaxed state slid into embarrassment.

“I’m sorry. I’m hitting on you and you’re already seeing someone. I can be such a dork!” Vanessa blurted out.

I reached across the table and touched her hand. Vanessa looked at me with stark, drunk eyes. I could tell she was ready to have her heart broken.

“Vanessa, Nyx and I are pretty freaky and open,” I said like it was something normal to say in a conversation.

Vanessa blinked as her body relaxed. “Really?”

“Yeah, and we are both into you,” I said with the tact of a bull in an orphanage.

Vanessa’s smile grew as she leaned a little forward. “Do tell.”

I smirked before parting my lips to tell her a little more, when a group of laughing people stepped into the bar.

We turned to see Aithen and a large squad of beautiful people step in, laughing and carrying on like otters on vacation. I’m not sure you can picture it, but I could, because otters are fucking cool.

“Brandon!” Aithen shouted as he looked over to me and Vanessa. “Everyone, this is Brandon Ferryman, manager of the hotel. Brandon and his beautiful date with him, this is everyone!”

Hellos and cheers filled the bar.

I smiled as I turned in my seat to them. “Hi everyone, but the bar is closed. We don’t have a bartender yet.”

“Nonsense! I’ll tend bar for the evening and pay you for doing it!” Aithen laughed. “I won’t take no for an answer. Everyone, take a seat at a table or the bar. I’ll be slinging drinks. Make sure you pay up! This is a business, and we want the hotel manager and his lovely date to be very happy!”

Heads nodded among the beautiful people as they sat at the bar and at some of the tables.

I watched as Aithen moved behind the bar and began grabbing glasses. For a small moment, I panicked. I pictured glasses flying and crashing to tiny shards as Aithen bungled his way along. After a few moments, I realized I was worried over nothing.

Aithen moved with showmanship, dexterity, and grace. He flipped bottles in the air, grabbed them and poured into glasses. All the beautiful people in the bar cheered him on as he slung drinks and slid them to waiting hands. The murmur of conversation floated into the air, blending with the jukebox music. A cloud of fun enthusiasm filled the bar and I relaxed as Aithen tended bar with a smile and a happy laugh.

I turned back to Vanessa with my drink in hand. “Now, where were we?”

Vanessa let out a girlish giggle. “Telling me how freaky you are.”

“Ah yes,” I grinned as I took a sip of my drink.

My smile vanished as something cold touched my senses. It seeped deep into me, touching my cracked soul. Tension crawled along my dead muscles like maggots under my skin. I exhaled and mist floated up like I was alive in the dead of winter.

I turned my head and gazed at the bar archway. A man stood in normal clothes, but his gaze was centered on me. He had short, dark hair, and a very average appearance, but something spoke louder, roaring like a monster.

The stranger took measured steps toward me and Vanessa. His dark gaze was like ice as he approached. His smile was sickening, like a rictus grin on a dead person, creepy and dark. The air grew colder as he stepped closer, and I was frozen in my chair. What was happening to me? Why did he look familiar?

“Hello. It is good to officially meet you after our brief experience together,” the stranger said before looking at Vanessa. “I do apologize for intruding on your date, but I had to meet your friend here, face to face.”

“Do I know you?” I asked as chaotic thoughts warred in stark confusion.

The man smiled and nodded. “We do know each other, but barely spoke more than a few words at a time. You used to visit my place of work and microwave burritos. The last time we saw each other was very special.”

My eyes widened as realization washed over me like rain on a stone.

“You do remember. Good. This will give us a chance to speak.”

The strange stranger snatched my burrito off its plate and bit off the end. He chewed for a moment before swallowing and grinning wide.

“What a tasty burrito. A perfect appetizer for what is to come,” the man smiled as shadows crawled over his eyes.

Ten

Knightmare

There are lines you just never cross. Taking candy from a baby, covering your hand in BBQ sauce and sticking it into a gator's mouth, and taking another person's burrito. If it wasn't a sin, it should be made into one. I mean, what kind of evil would snatch a person's well-earned burrito and take a bite? Its madness incarnate and I wasn't going to take it sitting down.

I leapt up as my hand shot up. The stranger simply smiled as my hand grabbed at his throat and poof, he vanished. I glanced around as I heard a sharp inhale of shock. I turned my head to see Vanessa scooting her chair back a little as the very same stranger pulled another seat over and sat down at our table.

"Please, have a seat," he said and pointed at my plate.

I glanced down to see my burrito still there, pristine and unharmed.

"I wouldn't be so rude to take another man's burrito. Considering how much you liked them at the Seven Twelve, I knew it would be an unforgivable sin. I only wanted to get your attention so we could talk."

I turned and faced him with uneasy eyes. Vanessa had a concerned look in her eyes, but she stayed at my side. The rest of the people at the bar quieted down, some glancing over their shoulders to the three of us, wondering if something was happening.

"Please, have a seat so we can discuss things like civilized undead," the man smiled.

My first instinct was to grab this guy and throw him out, but considering he was just using an illusion, I had no idea if he was just another illusion, or he was actually sitting there. My rage cooled as I sat down. He technically didn't do anything wrong, and I think that

was his point. He wanted to have a conversation and I figured I could give him a few minutes before I kicked him out to the curb.

“Thank you for taking a moment to talk,” the man said with his creepy smile.

“Okay, I’m sitting. What do you want to talk about?” I said with a hard tone.

The man gave me a simple nod. “A business opportunity, but I’m getting ahead of myself. Let’s make formal introductions. My name is Todd Wells, former clerk at the Seven Twelve.”

Todd looked me in the eyes as he continued, “You’re Brandon Ferryman, Manager for the Coffin Hotel.”

Todd looked over to Vanessa. “Vanessa Ode, former sister of the Sisterhood and on the run.”

Vanessa’s gaze shifted from concern to annoyance.

Todd turned his gaze back to me. “You died when you came into my store while it was being robbed. I remembered how you kept your back to the altercation as I shot it out with the robber, which ended my life.”

“Is this why you’re here? Revenge or need to clear up something before I help you move along to your reincarnation?”

Todd chuckled. “No, nothing as mundane as that. You see, I like being dead. It’s very freeing without the mortal ties that bind us. As for revenge, I believe I am above such concepts, but that evening we died, our souls were connected by fate.”

“I hear a lot of shit coming out of your mouth,” I growled.

“Ah, I see. Perhaps I should get to the point. You have in your lovely hotel, three traitors to the cause, Draygon’s cause. My god doesn’t really care too much about the three in question, but he does care about an item in their possession. It is highly valuable and since you and I share an unusual connection, my masters thought it would be prudent if I came to barter a deal.”

“I’ve heard the name Draygon before. He’s a dark god who likes illusions, madness, and blood. Now why would I want to deal with a god, or his people, who are into all of that?”

Todd smirked. “You’re already dealing with Draygon and his people. The Abomination Girls were part of his flock, still part of his flock. Until Samhain allows them to his side, they still very much belong to Draygon.

“Now, we can broker a few deals to help everyone stay polite and comfortable. The first one, if you turn over the Abomination Girls and the item they are carrying, your hotel and Shroud Point will be free of any followers of Draygon. The few cultists in the town will pack up and leave, never to be heard from again. You will never see me again and you can enjoy the rest of your time on this nexus point without ever having to worry about Draygon attempting to take it over.

“The second offer, simply hand over the item. Keep the Abomination Girls and Draygon’s influence will put the hotel’s nexus point at the bottom of my dark lord's plans for the future. For good will, if you kill one or all of them, it will please my god and shift his focus to other places and events.”

Todd leaned a little forward as his gaze sharpened like daggers. “Or third, you ignore the offers and start a war you cannot win. I will have every cultist and monster that works for Draygon come here and break the hotel to pieces. We will infect the nexus point with chaos and use everybody here as fertilizer, bringing the dark gods one step closer to destroying this realm.”

I couldn’t hide my smile. “I like option number three.”

Todd’s eyes kept his sharp gaze as he gave me a single nod. “Witch angels are powerful, but there is always something stronger. Let’s take me for instance, in my life, I was a normal clerk at a store. I waved hello to people. I paid my taxes. I smiled a lot. I was a nobody. A person you would see on the street and never give a second thought.”

Todd grinned, showing his teeth. I glanced at them and saw them shift into sharp points. I don't mean like vampire teeth; I mean all the teeth in his mouth turned into sharp points.

"But in my private life, I was a devoted follower of Draygon. The night I died was a test of my spirit and my dedication. Someone was supposed to die that night, either by my hand, or by another. I was first to die, a bullet to the eye and brain, but it was still enough to show my dedication to the cause. Draygon was pleased and granted me the power and title of Knightmare. I became one of his true soldiers for chaos and now, I get to spill as much blood as I want, all in the name of his glory."

It was my turn to chuckle. "Draygon must be desperate to recruit some guy working at a Seven Twelve."

Todd grinned. "Much like Samhain recruiting a nobody with a freak obsession over burritos. I never knew your name when I worked there. I called you burrito weirdo and it seemed to fit perfectly; don't you agree?"

"I suppose all the gods are scraping the bottom of the barrel. But even if that's true, there is no way you and your stupid cult of average idiots are going to take this hotel."

Todd eyed me for a tiny moment before closing his eyes and sighing. "One way or another, Draygon will retrieve what was taken. We are legion and the Urth Realm will fall, as per Draygon's design."

I barked out a laugh. "You really are drinking this up? Listen to yourself. You sound like some preacher on the road, spreading his lies so the people with next to nothing so they will give you the crumbs they have.

"Hey, I understand, you had such an average life that you needed to feel special, I get that. What I don't get is why throw your hat in with that loser Draygon? You could have just died and be reincarnated into a new life, maybe a better one? Why join the losing side?"

I leaned forward with hard eyes and a smile. “Why don’t you join me? Together, we can rule the hotel as boss and employee.”

Todd blinked and shook his head. “Clearly, I’m not dealing with an intelligent mind. A show of strength may be required to help you decide.”

I laughed. “That’s funny coming from you. An intelligent mind doesn’t follow a god without questioning them. An intelligent mind carves out their own path and doesn’t bend to threats and coercion like a fucking tool.”

I stood up with a growing rage in my spirit. “Now, I think you’ve wasted enough of our valuable time. It’s trash day and I need to throw you in the bin.”

The murmur in the bar stopped and everyone turned in our direction. Vanessa stood up and stayed by my side. The whole bar was so quiet, you could hear a mouse sneeze behind the wall.

Todd stayed seated as he lifted his gaze and looked at me. “Are you sure you want to do this? It’s going to hurt.”

“It might, but don’t worry, I’ll call an ambulance to pick you up from the trash bin.” I leered.

Todd nodded. “So be it.”

I watched as Todd stood up. His gaze held writhing shadows and a thick menace. I think if I was alive, I would have been worried, but I had already fought a few monsters and the undead. I didn’t want to say I was over-confident, but I never pushed my abilities to the limit. It looked like we were going to have some playtime.

Black tendrils of smoke rose from Todd’s body. I heard movement behind me as angels slipped off stools and stood up from nearby tables. It seemed I had a few people watching my back. I glanced over at Vanessa as she stayed by my side.

Black smoke crawled over Todd’s thin frame. When he was nearly enveloped, the smoke hardened into a wicked, black armor. A helmet formed with skull-like features and pointed prongs along the

top, like an evil crown. Smoke crawled along his extended hand, reforming into a thick, heavy mace. I swear he looked like he was searching for some hobbits, and I wasn't going to let him take them to Isengard.

Todd hefted his mace as he looked at me, Vanessa, and a bar full of angels. "Let's create a sporting chance."

In my peripheral vision, two more exact copies of Todd appeared, covered in black armor and each one holding a mace.

"Brandon, we're with you," Aithen said from behind the bar.

I nodded. "Time to take out the garbage."

Todd's armored body was still one moment and in the next, he flashed forward with his mace at the side. The table between us was lifted and thrown in a fraction of a second and I felt the shadow of the mace touch my face as he held it high.

I summoned my stable overload and my hair flashed into waving blue flames. My hand shot up and caught him by the wrist, stopping it in mid-swing. There was a small part of me that thought Todd would vanish, like an illusion. Instead, my arm muscles trembled as I barely kept his arm up. Strength crashed into me as I stood my ground.

Time slowed down as Todd's armored fist swung around for my ribcage. I had practically perfect control as I twisted my upper body away from his swing. I didn't know it at the time, but that was exactly what Todd wanted. The arm I was holding twisted and the mace finished its swing into my head.

You know that sound when a hammer hits a bell? Well, I was the bell and Todd's mace was the hammer. A ringing blasted my senses as I stepped back. The pain was minimal, but the force behind the swing was unmistakable. He was stronger than he looked.

The sounds of crashing and bodies moving touched my ears as I twisted toward the incoming mace. Ghost fire engulfed my hands as my fist shot forth like a cannon and connected with his armored

forearm. Black armor cracked as I knocked away the swing and was greeted with an armored fist to my cheek. The power of the blow created a small shockwave as I stumbled to the side.

I glanced around as black and white wings unfurled from people's backs. Weapons made of light flashed as the group in the bar charged at the two other versions of Todd. Black maces swung and clashed against swords and maces of light. Shockwaves blasted out, shattering glasses filled with alcohol.

I turned to Todd as he rushed me with his mace at the ready. A tingling touched my burning hands as my fists shot out in quick strikes. Each fist connected with Todd's black armor. Cracks formed as his entire body shuddered from the impacts. I pulled back a fist and slammed it directly into his chest. A small explosion of blue and black light flashed as Todd was thrown off his feet and crashed into a table, shattering it into kindling.

My entire body hummed with power as I leapt into the air. Todd struggled to get up as I came down and slammed my burning fist into the side of his head. Power rippled as Todd's entire body slammed down sideways and cracked the floor underneath.

"Stay down," I said in a ghostly voice.

Todd turned his armored head toward me before he vanished before my eyes. I glanced around as angels clashed with the other two versions of Todd. Lydia appeared at the archway with two pistols drawn. The revenant aimed at the chaos but couldn't get a clear shot with the brawl storming on.

"Brandon!" Vanessa shouted.

I turned my head just as Todd appeared next to me and slammed an armored fist into my cheek. The power knocked me aside and before I could recover, a knee slammed into my stomach, bending me forward.

Blue flames burned brighter as he tried to knee me again, but I caught his leg right as it was coming up. I turned my head just as

Todd's black mace slammed into my head. Pain flared as darkness stabbed into my flaming head. Something had changed and I wondered if Todd was bringing his A game now.

"After I kill the Abomination Girls, I'm killing everyone in this fucking hotel!" Todd raged as he lifted his mace up again.

I was silent as a heart attack as my entire body pulsed with supernatural power. I clasped my hands together and reared back. Todd's mace was coming down as I swung my clasped hands up. I was quicker, hitting his armored side and sending him upwards. Todd flew high before slamming into a wall and cracking it. He began to slide down, but I was already to him with a reared back fist. I slammed my fist into his armored head, sandwiching it against the wall. The sound of cracking wood filled the air. When I pulled my hand back, Todd pushed off the wall and slammed his shoulder into my midsection. We both went crashing to the floor.

Pain began to crawl over my entire body. Something did change as patches of darkness clung to me like oil. Was this part of his power? I felt myself weaken as I reared back a burning fist and slammed it into Todd's head. The force was enough to lift him off my body and throw him five feet. He crashed into a set of tables and scattered them.

I rolled back to my feet, but a tremble touched my arms and legs. I glanced down at myself, seeing small dark patches writhing on me like black slugs. The ghost fire around my hands began to blink and my overload was weakened.

"You think you're the only one with abilities and…" Todd didn't finish as a bullet bounced off his head, followed by another.

I glanced to the side to see Lydia stepping forward with both of her pistols trained on Todd's armored head. She pulled the triggers, each in turn as the sounds of gunshots filled the bar.

I launched forward like a panther and when I reached Todd, a barrage of blue flaming fists slammed into him. Shockwaves filled the bar as his black armor cracked. Todd could do nothing but take it

until I reared back my right arm and my ghost fire faded away. Power drained from me as my hair flashed back to normal.

“My turn,” Todd said darkly as he clamped an armored hand over my face and lifted me off the ground.

I grabbed at his wrists as my body was swung sideways and my head crashed into the bar. Pain flashed hotter as my head went through the bar, cracking and destroying a part of it as I was slammed through it to the floor.

I barely regained my wits as I was grabbed by my leg and pulled from the ruined bar. I was lifted with wide eyes before being thrown down onto a table, shattering it to kindling.

“The key to winning any fight is endurance and skill,” Todd said with an other-worldly voice as he pulled me back up and swung me into the wall, the one I slammed him into just a moment ago.

I slid down to my feet and was barely standing. My vision was going in and out as Todd lifted his mace, ready to bring it down on my skull. I glanced past him to see Vanessa standing, but she looked different. Her ears were long and pointed, stabbing out from her hair. Her eyes were white and her skin extremely pale. Her mouth was open as she took in a deep inhale. When her head shot forward, a scream blasted out.

The scream slammed Todd dead-center in his back and blasted him forward. I managed to sidestep as Todd crashed into the wall and his mace went flying from his hand.

I tried to call upon my stable overload or my ghost fire, but nothing was happening. The patches of darkness on my arms and legs began to slowly dissolve as I tried to force my power to the surface. I couldn’t stand there and give him a chance to recover, so I did what anyone would have done in my situation, I grabbed a chair, lifted it up, and slammed it into Todd as he turned to me. The chair shattered to kindling, but I didn’t pull back. With the remaining shards of wood in my hands, I aimed one sharp point for a small, exposed space between his armored arm and his chest plate. The sharp point

stabbed in. Todd grunted as I let go and slammed my palm at the blunt end and drove the wood spike completely in.

Todd stepped back and tried to move his arm. It was limp at his side, the shard of wood deep within and fucking with the arm's motor functions.

I knew I had other powers in my arsenal, but the drain I felt was affecting all of me. I growled as I forced what power I could muster into my hands and blue light glowed.

I stared down at my hands as a thick chain of ghostly light appeared. It wasn't very long, but it's not about the length, but how you use it!

Todd lifted his left hand, his black mace flying up from the floor and into his waiting palm. He swung back his arm, ready to take my head off when my chain whipped forward and struck at his exposed wrist.

Todd's eyes widened behind his skull helmet as the delicate bones in the wrist snapped and his hand bent at an odd angle. The mace disappeared as I spun the chain and brought it hard across, slapping the ghost fire metal against his neck. Power flashed as Todd was thrown into the destroyed bar.

I glanced to the side to see the other two clones vanish instantly. The angels were breathing hard. Some of them were covered in knicks and bruises, but still standing. Vanessa and Lydia were behind me, ready to join the fight if I gave the word.

No, this was my fight.

I turned to Todd as his shoulders bounced to his chuckles. His armored form rose with his back to me. He lifted his ruined left hand and it snapped back into place. He turned around as the wood in his shoulder pushed out and hit the floor, bloodless.

"Pain is the great teacher. I will only improve from here. Thank you, Mr. Ferryman," Todd chuckled darkly.

The last of the darkness vanished from my arms and legs. I felt my power return and I growled. My hair flashed into blue flames as I reached forward and grabbed Todd by his breastplate. I lifted him up as I looked at him with glowing blue eyes.

“You’ve lost and justice will be served,” I said with an other-worldly tone.

“Not by your hand,” Todd hissed as spikes stabbed out from his armor.

A black spike penetrated my hand and pain roared. I heaved Todd to the side before throwing him at the wide bar window. Vanessa opened her mouth as Lydia aimed. The moment Todd hit the window and smashed it outwards, a sonic scream and bullets slammed into him as he flew out of the hotel.

I bent my legs and launched after him. Lydia and Vanessa stopped as I flew out of the destroyed window. My glowing eyes moved from side to side as I noticed Todd was not on the grass. My legs swung forward, and my boots hit the soft, grassy ground. My flaming blue hair illuminated the primal darkness, but Todd was nowhere to be seen. There were no tracks or anything I could use to follow him. He was gone like a ghost in the night.

I turned back to the bar window. Everyone was standing there and looking down on me with understanding eyes. I pulled back my power and my hair flashed back to normal. Weakness filled my muscles. It felt like I had run a marathon.

The front doors to the hotel slammed open and Nyx darted out. Blue flames engulfed her hands as she ran toward me. Vanessa in her undead form, floated out from the broken window and landed beside me.

I wavered on my feet, trying to keep it together. We won, but this was a marginal victory. I could tell Todd was holding back. The way he took those hits and kept going, plus the fact he was able to correct the damage to his limbs, meant if it was a one-on-one fight, I

might have lost in the long run. That thought didn't really sit well with me.

"Bran!' Nyx said as she grabbed me to steady me.

"I'm okay, just a little tired," I said in a low tone.

Concern remained in Nyx's eyes. "Was that a Knightmare? I barely saw it as you threw them through the window."

"Maybe we should talk a little more about this, in private," I said.

Vanessa moved to my side, her white gaze on me. She didn't change back as she put her hand around my waist and another on my stomach. Nyx stayed close, the two of them keeping me steady as we walked toward the front doors of the hotel.

"I'll take care of everything here," Lydia said to me, and I noticed there was no snark in her tone. Tonight, has been weird.

I found it hard to walk as Nyx and Vanessa led me inside and toward the stairs. Aithen and many other angels had poured out into the lobby. They smiled and nodded their heads in solidarity as we walked past them and to the stairs.

Taking the stairs was harder than I thought, but I managed. It felt like I was tenderized meat, ready to slap on the grill. I powered through as we reached the top of the stairs and turned toward the corridor of the west wing.

In moments, we were at the door to my room. Vanessa opened it as Nyx helped me inside. I was guided to the bed, where I promptly flopped onto it. I could barely keep my eyes open. The weakness came and went as I struggled to stay awake. I felt Nyx's hands on me as she pulled me up, turned me onto my ass, and lightly slapped my cheek.

"Knightmares have some parasitic abilities. They like to drain their opponents before moving on to cruel torture," Nyx explained.

I nodded. "Yeah, it feels pretty sucky."

Nyx stood before me with stern eyes. "Bran, tell me everything."

I forced my eyes to remain open as I spilled the beans on everything that happened in the bar. I told her where Todd was from and why he was here. She listened to every word as Vanessa was close by, still in her undead form. When I was finished, I simply sat and used every drop of willpower to stay awake.

“He shouldn’t have been that powerful. Knightmares normally cannot stand up to a witch angel. Samhain’s power over death is greater than Draygon’s power of illusion and madness. If this Todd is dead and brought back, he would have had a hard time fighting you,” Nyx spoke her thoughts.

“What are conflicts like between witch angels and knightmares normally?” I asked.

Nyx smirked. “We have the power, but knightmares have the numbers. It’s unheard of for a single knightmare to take on a single witch angel. They often roam and attack in packs or more. The reason why they can’t normally take us on is because knightmares are dead souls who proved their dedication to Draygon, but they are still dead and within Samhain’s influence.”

“Maybe I’m rusty,” I joked.

Nyx let out a small laugh. “You’re not rusty. It seems like he was overpowered.”

A memory flashed across my tired mind. “What about those chaos crystals?”

Nyx gave a small, grave nod. “It’s possible. Chaos crystals can fuel a knightmare if they are attuned to them. It’s a kind of dark magic I’m not completely versed in. But you’re right. If there are chaos crystals close by, this Todd may have been drawing upon them.

“But something doesn’t make sense. We stopped the shipment they tried to smuggle into the hotel. If there are chaos crystals in the hotel, Holly, you, and I would have sensed them.”

“I would have sensed them too,” Vanessa said with a dark voice.

“Maybe around the grounds?” I yawned.

Nyx eyed me before she glanced at Vanessa. A small smile crept into Nyx’s pale cheeks as she looked back down on me.

“I’ll organize a search of the grounds and re-check the hotel,” Nyx informed me before she looked over to Vanessa. “I can’t stay to keep an eye on him. Would you stay and make sure he’s, okay? The knightmare may have left a few lingering effects.”

“I can,” Vanessa said as her white eyes glowed in the dim light.

Nyx looked back to me. “Take care of yourself tonight. We can talk in the morning after the hotel is searched from top to bottom.”

I tried to get up, “I have to help.”

Nyx put her arm on my shoulder and forced me back onto the bed. “We can handle this. Rest up my strong man. I’ll see you both at breakfast.”

I watched as Nyx turned and strode out of my room. She closed the door behind her, and silence filled my room.

A heaviness pulled at me as I turned my gaze to Vanessa. She sat beside me, still in her undead form. White eyes stared at me. It felt like she was waiting for me to react a certain way, but all I could see was friend.

“You don’t cringe at how I look?” Vanessa asked with a small voice.

“Should I?” I answered as my eyelids grew heavy. I fought with every inch of my fractured soul to not pass out.

Vanessa looked down. “I was having a lot of fun on our date before the knightmare appeared and…I wanted you to see the real me. I understand if you want me to leave.”

I reached over and placed my hand over hers. Vanessa looked up with white eyes as I smiled.

“Vanessa, you do understand that beauty is more than skin deep?”

She nodded. “I do, but that is not true for everyone.”

I gave her a weak smile. “It’s true for me. It’s true for us.”

Vanessa’s eyes widened a hair. We felt a deep connection and it burned at our souls. A thought stabbed into my feelings, and I let out a small sigh.

“Vanessa, I have to tell you something,” I said before explaining about Samhain’s orders, the Abomination Girls, the Eye of Thull, and the Sisterhood envoy coming to the hotel.

Vanessa listened to every word. When I reached the part about the envoy, she looked away. Her features began to change. Long ears slid back to normal. The dead look in her face warmed, and her cheeks filled with a dim pink glow. In a matter of seconds, Vanessa looked like her living self.

“Thank you for telling me. I know it was hard to tell me because of my past with the Sisterhood. When the envoy does arrive, I will have to hide away until they are gone. I don’t want them to send others to bring me back,” Vanessa said softly.

“We won’t let that happen. I won’t let that happen,” I said with conviction.

A wave of weakness washed over me, and I swayed. I must have been drained more than I thought.

“I understand if you have to leave,” I said, giving her an out. Despite our connection, I still wasn’t sure where all of this was leading too. Nyx did call me her big, strong man. I wasn’t sure if she said it to stake her claim or tell Vanessa she was fine with sharing.

“Why would I leave?” Vanessa said with a wicked smirk. “I might be the only person in the hotel that can help you.”

I slowly blinked as I fought to stay awake.

Vanessa stood up and faced me as I sat on the edge of the bed. She looked down on me with tender eyes.

“Mortis, or death energy, isn’t just for feeding. Like mana can heal the living, mortis can heal the dead. It’s a little different than simply touching you to heal you. The dead are naturally greedy with their energies. Death energy is no different. For me to heal you, we have to get close.”

“You mean like close close?”

Vanessa kept her small smile. “Close close.”

Vanessa lifted a hand and touched my cheek. “Brandon, I felt something when we first met. It has never dimmed and…” she trailed off.

“I think we are at the point where we can be honest with each other,” I said like a priest comforting a widow and she really wanted to be comforted. “And please, call me Bran.”

Vanessa’s eyes glowed with dim, supernatural light. “It’s good to hear that, because I really like you. I really like Nyx. I like it here. I like being…maybe I should just show you.”

I watched as Vanessa reached behind her back with both hands. I couldn’t see, but I knew she was undoing her dress. I was about to offer to help when another wave of weakness washed over me. All I could do was watch as she opened several buttons from behind her and her tight dress loosened.

I glanced up to Vanessa’s determined gaze as the tight collar of the dress loosened around her neck. My gaze traveled down as she took hold of her dress and pulled it away. Hands fell to her hips, and she pulled down the fabric. The dress slid over her curves and spilled to the floor, covering her ankles and feet.

I seemed to forget I was tired for a moment as I stared at Vanessa’s nude body. Her skin was silky smooth in the dim light. She was fit and soft at the same time. The dress was holding her assets close to the chest because the moment the dress fell, her large

breasts nearly burst from the confining fabric. Small pink nipples stood at attention as large breasts defied gravity's pull. Despite their size, gravity was more of a suggestion and not a rule. I could suffocate between them, but since I didn't need to breathe, I found my new home.

My gaze slipped down to her stomach and hips. She had an hourglass figure, but her chest threw everything slightly off balance, not that I was complaining. When my gaze fell to her inviting thighs and clean-shaven slit, I was suddenly very thirsty.

"Bran, I should tell you something," Vanessa said without a hint of shyness in her eyes or voice.

"You're a freak, like the rest of us," I managed a small smirk.

"You understand," Vanessa said as she stepped closer.

I lifted my hands to grab her when weakness pulled. I fell backwards and bounced on the bed.

"I'm not letting you get away from me," Vanessa said in an almost threatening tone.

I stared at the ceiling as hands grabbed at my belt. A blink later, boots and pants were pulled off and thrown aside. I tried to grab at my shirt when Vanessa crawled over me. I had a face full of boob as she grabbed my shirt with one hand and held my head to her chest with the other. She was strong and I certainly wasn't going to stop her. The shirt came up and off. It sailed through the air and landed somewhere on the floor.

I barely managed to turn on my side and crawl into bed. Vanessa moved with me, her silky skin touching my body. My muscles may have been weak, but my soldier was not taking this lying down. Blood pumped and I felt him rise to the occasion. I saw a promotion in his future.

Vanessa settled down beside me and we faced each other. I was admiring her beauty, but she was looking at me like a wolf going in

for the kill. She snuggled closer, our naked bodies touching. Fingers gently wrapped around my cock and began slowly stroking.

“I like what I saw, with you and Nyx in the penthouse,” Vanessa said with a sultry edge.

“You…spied on us?” I said without much shock in my voice.

Vanessa gave me a look like she had her hand in the cookie jar and dared me to spank her.

“When you’re feeling better, don’t hold back,” Vanessa whispered before sliding down.

I watched her as she slid down further and further along my body. She stroked me the whole way down until her lips kissed the end of my now rock-hard soldier. Lips gently kissed and her tongue flicked out, licking at the tip.

It felt nice, but I was too tired to do much else but enjoy it. After a small moment, lips wrapped around my member and teeth grazed my shaft. I readied myself for a time of slow sucking when nails dug into my hip and her mouth tightened around my manhood. Energy prickled along my shaft as teeth remained. The same kind of energy sparked along her fingernails and stabbed into my hip. Darkness caressed my lower body before it invaded it.

Death and energy blasted my nerves as Vanessa’s head moved with power. Her tongue slathered against the shaft in her full mouth, and she moaned loud enough to wake the dead. Her lips were like a vice and her tongue was like a snake on ninety-nine cups of coffee. I think normally, I would be a little freaked out, but something else was happening and I was into it.

Weakness abated as a new strength filled my muscles. My dead heart pumped as I started to feel whole again. I looked down as Vanessa slathered on me like I was the only cock in town and she was very hungry. She didn’t look up, muffled moans vibrating along my cock like it was a musical instrument.

Energy returned as Vanessa bobbed her head along my member, sucking every inch of cock. My hand touched her head, trying to slow her down, but she smacked my hand away and sucked harder. It was like she was shedding every drop of control and letting her true self come out.

Two can play at this game!

Fingers curled into her hair and forced her to slow down. I was feeling better and better, not just from the energy, but from how well Vanessa was speaking to my manhood. My cock vibrated in her mouth as she moaned louder. I purposely slowed her head down to long, slow strokes and she whimpered for more. She opened her eyes and looked up. They had appeared innocent, but I could see her demon side behind those beautiful wide eyes.

“Slow down. I want to enjoy fucking your mouth,” I said with a sinister edge.

Vanessa moaned louder as she followed my directions, keeping to the tempo I created. She moved with long strokes and moaned as my cock touched the back of her throat.

“Do you like daddy, or master?” I asked.

I allowed her to pull back and she looked up as her lips let go of my cock. “Master,” she said and rubbed my cock against her cheek.

“I need to know you're dedicated to me,” I said with a dark whisper.

“Anything for you, Master,” Vanessa moaned before licking at my cock.

I turned onto my back, and she stayed with me, licking and sucking on the tip like her life depended on it.

“I said show me,” I hissed as I looked at her.

Vanessa sat up but couldn’t keep her hand off my cock. She stroked me as her eyes hungered for more.

“Please Master, what can I do to show you. I want to please you. Let me please you,” Vanessa begged.

“Straddle my thighs,” I commanded.

Vanessa was up and stood over me. She started to sink down when I grabbed my cock and stroked it. I watched her as she was on her knees, straddling my legs. She reached for my cock.

“No,” I stated.

Vanessa whimpered as her hands touched my thighs.

“I want to taste how much you want to please me,” I said darkly as I stroked myself to the sight of her large breasts.

One hand slid up her side and grabbed at one of her large breasts. A finger swirled along a pointed nipple. Her other hand snaked between her parted legs. She made more swirls as she caressed her valley entrance. She bit her lip as her hips betrayed her.

“I want to please. I want to show you,” Vanessa whined as the sounds of wetness touched the air.

I was rigid in my hand, seeing her desperation to please me. Her breasts bounced to her small movements. Her scent touched my nose, and I drank it in like a fine wine. Energy came back to me as Vanessa fought every urge to jump on me.

“I can’t stop myself,” she whispered as two fingers moved in faster swirls.

“I can smell your love, but I haven’t tasted it,” I said with a firm tone.

Vanessa let out a small moan as her thighs began to tremble.

I slowly sat up as she was getting closer and closer to climax. The tension in her body made her moan louder like she was going to fly apart at any moment. I kissed her exposed nipple and gave it lick. She shuddered as she moaned. The teasing was driving her out of control, and I was enjoying every moment of it.

“You want to sit on Master’s cock?” I asked.

“I very much want to sit on Master’s cock,” Vanessa said and gasped as I clamped my lips on her standing nipple and gave it a gentle bite.

“They are sensitive. Please Master, I’m going to come if you keep doing that.”

I ignored her as I sucked on her nipple. She gasped and moaned, unwilling to stop me. My hands grabbed at her waist, but I didn’t pull her closer. She whined and moaned until heat flashed. I looked up as she let out a long, deep moan. Wetness dripped from between her legs and flowed along her fingers. It splashed on my thigh as she continued to rub herself raw with unrelenting urges.

I pulled back from her abused nipple. The connection burned bright between us, Vanessa milking every drop of her orgasm. She looked down on me with sultry eyes before pulling her hand away and putting two wet fingers to my lips. My tongue snaked out, licking at her fingers, and tasting her seductive honey. It made my soldier rage with need.

“Master, can I sit on your lap,” Vanessa asked with distilled innocence.

I gave her a simple nod.

She nearly slammed into me, wrapping her arms around my shoulders. Her dripping wet slit mashed against my cock, her hips rubbing against me. I wasn’t inside as she moved on me like a horny animal. Bliss curled between us as she whimpered her needs. She maneuvered her hips and a hand snaked down between us. She grabbed me and nearly slammed her tight valley entrance on my throbbing super soldier.

Vanessa and I both let out a long, heated moan. Gravity helped her along, as did my hands, as she slid down every inch. Wetness surged as she slid down to the hilt, her inner world squeezing me and never wanting to let go.

“You feel so fucking good,” Vanessa moaned in my ear.

“I don’t want you to curse,” I said as my hands grabbed her ass and kept her to task.

“I’m sorry, Master. I promise, I’ll do better,” Vanessa whimpered as she moved.

“That’s my good girl,” I said as bliss and ecstasy glowed between us.

“I really want to be your good girl,” Vanessa sighed as her toes curled along the side of my legs.

The intimate symphony played on as I grabbed at her, and she bounced on my cock. My hands explored every part of her as the sound of skin on skin played music to our ears. She squeezed me every time she moved up and squeezed me again when she reached the hilt. The snug, tight connection caused moans to fill the air.

I felt like a new person. Energy pulsed through me, even after she turned off the flow. It was surreal, feeling her on me, against me as energy prickled along my nerves.

“Vanessa,” I said as I held her close. “You want to make me happy, right?”

Vanessa nodded as she squeezed my throbbing +5 Spear of Manliness.

“Come for me,” I said with a commanding tone.

Vanessa let out a loud moan as she clutched at me. She bit her lip again, upping the tempo as she rode my cock like she was escaping the sheriff after robbing a bank.

“I…I…” Vanessa managed as her gaze slid into her skull.

Nails stabbed into my shoulders as her head leaned back. She bounced on me, silent as a grave for a long moment before her entire body spasmed and shuddered hard. She gasped for air as her full breasts bounced in my face. I licked at her cleavage and smooth

skin as she moved on me like she was possessed. Wetness surged between our connection as she made inhuman moans. And just when I thought she had enough, another orgasm blasted her senses to glass, followed by another.

I could feel her body relax as she continued to ride my member. Wetness continued to flow as I stared at Vanessa. She wasn't home as her body betrayed her and continued to milk every drop of her orgasms. She must have been holding back an ocean of urges and desire as her head lifted. Her forehead touched mine as I helped her to move on my member.

The moment she started to slow, I turned and slammed her back down on the bed. I was over her, our connection never breaking. She gasped and made happy whimpers as I was on her. My hips moved, driving myself deep into her inner world. Her thighs spread as she surrendered to me.

"I'm going to love you now," I said, not taking no for an answer.

Vanessa's eyes slid back into place and looked up at me with mild shock. She stared at me with half-closed eyes as my hips thundered between her sensual thighs.

"Please, spray your love on me," Vanessa begged as she moved her hips to my repeated invasions.

My hips betrayed me as I thrust harder. My soldier was ready to mutiny, and I wasn't sure I could keep him under control much longer. I held her close, cradling her head in my hand as my thrusts did all the talking.

"Do you like it? Am I you're good girl?" Vanessa asked with breathy whispers.

I was silent, driving my urges to the tipping point. Vanessa squirmed and held onto me, whimpering for more. It felt like I was holding back a tidal wave. I grunted and Vanessa moaned louder. Her voice was like a whip to my urges, goading them on. The promised land was approaching, and the brake lines were cut.

“Please…fuck me like you own me,” Vanessa said in the sweetest, most innocent voice I had ever heard in my life.

I let out a roar as I pulled back. I grabbed my cock and stroked it once before thick spurts of come shot forth like cannon fire. Vanessa writhed as thick come splashed against chin and onto her mountainous breasts. She gasped and moaned as spurts splashed onto her stomach and trailed down to her slit. Her hands rose, grabbing her own breasts and pushing them up. She licked at my come, curling her tongue into her mouth, and sucking down any drop of seed she could get.

I was on my knees as I looked down on Vanessa like she was some depraved siren.

“Suck the last of it out,” I commanded.

Vanessa curled up without a second thought. She grabbed the tip of my cock with her lips and gently sucked on me. One last spurt touched her tongue and she moaned as she milked me dry. I felt her swallow and she pulled back.

We looked at each other as we both heaved. Affection glowed as she smiled, and my manhood was still hard.

“I need more,” we both said at the same time.

We laughed for a moment before I was on her again, snuggling to her large breasts and Vanessa moving her hips, enticing my soldier for another invasion.

It looked like our night of healing was just beginning and I was ready to show just how dedicated I was to the healing arts.

Eleven

Training Day

Moans touched the air as beams of sunlight stabbed into my bedroom. For a tiny, brief instant, I enjoyed the serene moment as I was hilt deep in Vanessa. Pleasure pulsed as I pulled my gaze from the morning light and looked down on Vanessa as she moaned her bliss.

Vanessa was on all fours and pushing against me as I was invading her. She didn't glance back, her moans like music in the morning. I looked down at our connection, inches appearing and disappearing between us and between her firm ass cheeks. The intimate scents rose like a perfume and I basked in it as we continued our relentless love making.

The whole night was like this. There was very little sleep. Many times, throughout the night, we came and passed out, only for one or both of us to wake a small time later and attack the other. Sometimes it was me driving my raging soldier into battle. Other times it was her, sheathing my sword and riding it without asking for permission. We were caught in a spiral loop of pleasure and tiny bouts of pain. Our bodies regenerated quickly, but there is something to be said when you want to say no but can't form the word. And, let's be honest, saying no was the furthest thing from both of our minds.

The sound of my hips slapping at Vanessa's ass brought me back to reality. I looked down at her back as she forced herself against my invasion again and again. She was insatiable and I wasn't exactly being a prude with our alone time.

"Master, am I a good girl?" Vanessa asked with a breathy whisper.

"It depends on how hard you make me come," I said in a low dark tone.

I knew she liked that because she moaned louder to turn me on and it friggin worked nearly every time. I thickened and she slowed her pace, making sure to feel every inch. She looked back with innocent eyes and all I wanted to do was show her how much fun I was having.

“I will milk your cock with my pussy,” Vanessa said with a dreamy whisper.

What little control I had left was shattered. I groaned loudly as my cock thickened and spurts of baby batter sprayed her tight inner world. Vanessa stayed true to her word, slowly milking more from my soldier, and looking back at me the whole time. The eye connection was a little unnerving, Vanessa’s body shuddering from her own orgasm. I think she liked to see me get off which is fair because I liked to see her get off too.

The door to the room opened and a figure slipped in. I let out another groan as the last of my yogurt spurted and I felt it drip from our connection.

“So happy to see you both getting along,” Nyx said as she sauntered over.

I glanced down and expected Vanessa to pull away and throw a blanket over herself. I mean, I might have done that if Nyx and I hadn’t already performed the horizontal mambo. Instead, Vanessa pulled away, turned and sat down closer to me. I was on my knees when she grabbed my slippery cock and stroked it. It was still covered in come and honey. Her grip was just right to keep me from softening in her hand. She stroked my cock, the tip pressed against one of her large breasts as Nyx stepped to the side of the bed.

“Can I suck on your cock, Master?” Vanessa asked politely.

“You can,” I said and barely a second later, her lips were around the half-way point and gently sucking on me like I was a piece of candy.

Nyx looked at me with mischievous eyes. “Lydia is watching the front desk. We should get up and on with our day. I have a surprise for you after you finish your morning routines.”

“What kind of surprise?” I asked, trying to keep a straight face with Vanessa’s head bobbing on my Staff of Resurrection.

“If I told you, I would have to kill you,” Nyx smirked before looking down on Vanessa. “She has really shed her shy side. She reminds me of a younger me.”

I nodded as I grew harder in her mouth.

“Can I join? I should join,” Nyx said with hungry eyes.

I looked down on Vanessa, “Can Nyx join us?”

Vanessa pulled my cock from her mouth and looked up as she stroked me. “Anything you want, master. I’m here to serve and be a good girl.”

Dammit! I felt my urges rise again. If she kept talking to me like that, we’re never going to get any work done around here.

Nyx grabbed her hat and tossed it aside. Fingers slipped into straps. Soon, her top, bottom, and boots went flying across the floor. Vanessa resumed sucking on my throbbing mace as Nyx crawled onto the bed. I stared at her naked body as she reached out and caressed Vanessa as she moaned with her mouth full. Nyx was gentle, running her fingers along Vanessa's curves and smooth skin. Seeing the two of them caused my soldier to fly into a berserker rage. If I knew being dead was this fun, I would have killed myself ages ago.

Nyx moved behind Vanessa and lowered her mouth to Vanessa’s dripping slit. I watched as she closed her eyes and moaned, her lower face buried between Vanessa’s ass cheeks. Vanessa moaned louder as my cock touched the back of her throat.

Nyx pulled back with honey and come on her chin. “You both taste wonderful. I need more to get me through the day,” Nyx said and attacked Vanessa like a rabid wolverine with nothing to lose.

I tried to hold it together as their muffled moans were like a symphony to my soul. Long minutes passed until, in a flash of insanity, I unleashed a torrent of love. Vanessa continued to milk my cock with her lips as her eyes slid into her head. Nyx moaned louder as she slathered at Vanessa's valley entrance.

Time stood still long enough for me to enjoy the sight before me. It burned onto my mind, the three of us having fun.

When the moment fell back to heated passion, I thought, yeah, I could go again. Think how clear my mind will be today. I wasn't doing this for me, but for running the hotel better. Yeah, let's go with that.

***

The morning was, dare I say, really nice. Nyx, Vanessa, and I left the room after I had to practically pry them off me. It was playful, with an edge of not playful. I called them sluts and they said "Why don't you come over here and fuck us, you coward!" We laughed, but I really had to pull away or the hotel might burn down. We had angels and necromancers having trainings and a convention and I had no idea how it was going to go.

The three of us made it to the stairs before Nyx walked off without saying a word. Vanessa and I went down to the lobby to relieve Lydia. Lydia eyed Vanessa and then looked at me. She stared at me with blank eyes for a moment before she turned and walked off, muttering something about patrolling the hotel.

I glanced into the bar, expecting it to still be destroyed by the fight last night. To my surprise, the place was whole, like nothing happened. My jaw dropped as Holly spoke in my mind.

"I took the liberty of repairing the damage from last night. It drained me a little, so I might be quiet for a day or two. I hope that's okay?"

I nodded. *"It's super great! Thank you, Holly. Take any time you need. I won't bother you until you're ready to wake up."*

“Brandon, you can wake me any time,” Holly said with a faint voice before she fell asleep.

I was all smiles as Vanessa and I moved behind the front desk and ran through our morning routine. The world was crystal clear, and an infectious happy feeling filled the air. Vanessa eyed me with shy smiles, and I couldn’t help but feel the same way. Was I running a fever, or was I happy? I don’t know and I wasn’t about to question it. We had fun and I was looking forward to more fun, but we had a hotel to run.

I checked the messages left by Lydia. Most of them were small things like send up water and someone’s blinds weren’t working. There was a note about the Abomination Girls, Lydia detailing that they had been behaving. It was good to read that because I was worried about them.

The time over the last few days and nights had been trying, at best. Nagging thoughts punctured my mind, thinking about the gunman and Todd. It didn’t sit well with me how the fight went last night. If it was one on one, I’m not sure I would have beaten him. He was strong and had some weird ax to grind with me. The gunman had a bullet with my name on it. It was odd to be dealing with two ghosts that I thought I would never encounter again. The three of us were caught in some strange web and I felt like I was at the center of it.

None of it explained the bigger picture stuff. Samhain chose to make me a witch angel and run the Coffin Hotel, despite me never doing a heroic thing in my life. It didn’t make a lick of sense why he would give me so much reasonability so quickly. As for Todd and the gunman, the two of them were caught in a robbery gone wrong. I was there just to get a burrito. The three of us should not be connected in any way other than that moment, but was the moment meant to bind us? Were we destined to be tied together or was this the universe’s idea of a bad joke? I thought I knew the punchline when I died, but the more I thought about it, the more I think I might have gotten the wrong joke.

I shook the thoughts away. I felt a hand touch my ass and give it a squeeze. I looked at Vanessa as she looked up at me with innocent eyes and a not so innocent smile. She let go and faced the desk like nothing happened. The lobby was empty at the moment, and I had a mighty need to grab her and kiss her. I stopped myself and simply decided to talk.

“Last night was amazing. I think we need more nights like that,” I said.

Vanessa looked over with warm eyes. “Me too. I loved all of it, especially when Nyx joined us.”

“I didn’t know if you were, well, into that?” I said, trying not to be weird.

Vanessa giggled. “Bran, I’m into a lot of things. We can explore them together. Maybe we should bring Mara and Lydia into them as well.”

“You’re talking my language,” I laughed.

“You’re not the only one with healthy desires. Being dead makes you appreciate the closeness even more. And with us, last night was just a taste.”

I nodded. “Oh yeah, thanks for the healing.”

Vanessa nodded. “Oh yeah, thanks for the orgasms.”

The two of us looked at each other and started laughing. It was such a change from how I first met her. She was so shy and skittish; I was afraid I might be too much for her. Little did I know, I was being a blind idiot. When you’re alone for most of your life, you tend to not think about anyone else or what they desire. The focus is purely on you. But with the hotel and my growing group of friends, it’s quite a change from my narrow world. Death and the hotel opened many new doors for me, and I felt like a new person, a better person.

Or I was stuck in an after-sex haze, but I’ll take it! No need to look a gift universe in the Uranus.

“Vanessa, I’m going to do my rounds. You okay here at the front desk?” I asked.

Vanessa looked over at me with knowing eyes. “I think I’ll be okay. But if I have any problems, I’ll be sure to beg for the answers from you while I’m on my knees.”

I was about to walk away when I had to give her a double take from that answer. Vanessa showed no hint of shyness as she looked at me like a primal creature. Did I open Pandora’s closet and allow sexual chaos into the world? If I did, everyone could thank me. We did it!

I stepped away, against my own lewd thoughts. Someone was going to get punished later and it’s not going to be me.

I stepped into the eastern main corridor and made my way to the kitchen. I stepped in to see Mara moving around like a contained whirlwind. I watched her as I couldn’t figure out how she fed a hotel filled with people by herself? She seemed very much in her element, even having a moment to glance at me and give me a wide smile before shoveling food onto plates.

“Mara, I think you need more help,” I said.

Mara spun around like a dancer in a glass figurine shop. She knew the kitchen like the back of her green, undead hand and I felt like my very presence might knock off her flow.

“I’m fine, but I won’t say no to more help. The hotel is getting bigger and that means more guests. I can handle it for now, but we should talk about the future,” Mara said as she put down a few more empty plates.

The zombie girl slowed down, turned, and leaned against the counter. She looked at me as she let out a small sigh.

“Bran, I want to spend time with you too. If I can have more help, that means we can be together.”

I crossed the kitchen and stood before her. She looked up at me with innocent eyes.

“Is this about Vanessa and Nyx?” I asked.

Mara smiled and didn’t look away. “This is about me and you. I’m not greedy. I don’t mind sharing; I just want to have some time with you.”

“Thank you for telling me. I’ll get you some help to ease the workload,” I stated.

“That means I can help with other loads,” Mara winked.

I couldn’t hold back my smile as gravity could not hold down my cock.

Mara and I kissed before I took my leave and stepped out into the dining hall. I was greeted with many smiles from angels and cloaked necromancers. There were more necromancers than angels. Several hands waved and I waved back. I crossed the dining hall to the open doors of the ballroom. I stepped inside and stared in amazement.

The ballroom was set up with many tables, curtains, and odd areas for small gatherings. Music played throughout the massive room. Skeletons walked around with trays of candy. They would bow to people, offering up little sweets. I looked around and saw a small area with a pile of bones and several robed figures. Two people in black robes were with a shorter, thinner person in a black robe. A necromancer stood by them and handed a wand to the shorter one.

“Remember to focus your power,” the necromancer said.

The shorter necromancer lifted a wand toward the pile of bones and uttered arcane words. In a dark flash, a skeleton pulled together and stood up. The shorter necromancer jumped for joy and the skeleton began to dance.

“Well done, son,” the two taller necromancers said to the shorter one.

“Thanks mom and dad!” the shorter one said as he danced with the dancing skeleton.

The moment pulled at my heartstrings. The family that raises the dead together, stays together.

Maybe I was worrying about the wrong things? From what I could see, the necromancers were just enjoying some undead magic. It was almost like family fun, but, um, with the dead. I mean, skeletons are cool, no doubt about that. And everything I was seeing was informative. I glanced at booths with books on necromancy, from beginner to expert. There were signs about how to care for smelly zombies. I really wanted to check out a booth that labeled themselves, “How to put ghosts to work! If they are haunting your place and not paying rent, they should be better roommates!”

I soaked it all in as I watched everyone enjoying the convention. A sliver of shadow touched me and pressed down on my senses. It was an odd tingle, but it was there, like a cat ready to pounce on your leg for no apparent reason. A haze touched my eyes and I swayed to the dark song.

I blinked a few times, and the touch of shadow was gone. Maybe I was being affected by so many necromancers in one place, which is weird because I didn’t feel anything like this with any of the other conventions. Maybe I was having a moment of clarity because I spilled enough seed to fill a hot tub last night? I didn’t know and I wasn’t about to investigate while everyone was having their fun. I needed to keep to my rounds before meeting Nyx for a surprise. I hoped it was Nyx jumping out of a cake. Who didn’t like half-naked people and cakes? No one, that’s who!

I turned and made a discreet exit as the young necromancer was given cotton candy and his skeleton continued to dance.

I made my way down the main corridor. Thoughts floated on clouds as I walked. I crossed the lobby and spotted Vanessa looking up, the two of us making eye contact. I smiled as I kept going. Damn the feels! My heart rate increased by just walking by and seeing her. It made me have strange thoughts, like I wanted to buy her a sword and shield. I thought Nyx snared my heart, but it seemed I was snared by a few ladies. I’m not complaining, but I must do right by

them and shower them with many things, not just my hot, creamy love.

I continued walking toward the west wing. It didn't take long to get to the WOKE training rooms. One door was partially opened, and I stepped to it and peered in.

Aithen was standing before a whiteboard with the letters S and H. Beautiful people were sitting in chairs, their attention purely focused on Aithen as he continued.

"Alright everyone. We all know that to infiltrate groups dedicated to chaos, we must act like them. The first thing we are learning today is cursing. Most people dedicated to evil tend to curse or swear. We must learn and use the words properly if we want to fit in.

"Nina, can you tell me which curse word starts with an S and an H?"

Nina glanced around with nervous eyes before she stood up. "I…think I know it, but I'm not sure I can say it."

Aithen nodded. "Nina, this is a safe space. We are here to learn and support each other. Relax and let the word flow."

"We support you," a beautiful woman said.

"You can do it!" a beautiful man said.

"Think you're evil and you can talk like evil," another beautiful woman cheered.

Nina took a deep breath and exhaled. "Shhhhhiii. Um, Shhhh. Err, Shiiii," Nina tried.

"Try using it in a sentence, "Aithen smiled.

Nina took in another breath. "You have shhhhh for brains," Nina tried again. "I can't do it!" she said with a low tone.

I couldn't stop myself as I stepped in, closed the door behind me and locked it. All heads turned to me, and smiles bloomed.

"Welcome to the training, Manager Ferryman!" Aithen beamed.

“Thanks. I had to come in because it looked like you were having some trouble. But please, call me Brandon,” I said as I stepped to the other side of the white board.

I looked at all the beautiful people as they all smiled and stared at me. Each one had a notepad and pencil in hand. They looked eager and terrified at the same time.

I looked over to Aithen, “For future reference, when conducting secret trainings, always close and lock the door.”

Aithen nodded and smiled. I looked at the room full of angels as they wrote it down. Nina had sat back down and was writing on her pad as well.

“May I?” I asked and glanced at the board.

“Please,” Aithen said and took a step back.

I cracked my knuckles before picking up a marker and added the I and T to the word.

Small gasps filled the training room.

I turned and faced the room as I pointed to the word. “The key to swearing and cursing is to not think about it. Just tap into your inner hatred and let it flow like water from a glass.”

“What if we don’t have hate in our hearts?” Nina asked innocently.

“Everyone has hate in their hearts. Some have a little hate and some have a lot of hate. You just have to find your inner hate and use it.”

“But we don’t have anything to hate,” another angel said.

“Bullshit,” I said.

Eyes widened.

“Does everyone here like pudding?”

All heads nodded in agreement.

“What if I gave everyone here some pudding, but told Nina she couldn’t have one because she can’t say the word shit?”

“I would give her some of my pudding,” a beautiful person smiled.

“WRONG!” I shouted. “You’ve had a hard day of killing monsters and evil people. You come home tired and wrecked, the thought of that pudding the only thing keeping your sanity. You open your fridge and see only one pudding cup. You take it, ready to wash away the blood and evil you had to endure today. Nina shows up and asks for some pudding, but you have the last one. You only wanted a sliver of happiness and Nina was going to take that away. How do you feel?”

All eyes turned to Nina and she bowed her head. Shadows covered her eyes.

“I would keep the pudding and think Nina was shit?” one angel said in a tone so low, I could barely hear it.

I smiled. “Exactly. You see, you managed to say the word shit because you needed that pudding and Nina wasn’t being a good friend.”

I turned to the whiteboard and began writing every curse word I could think of, which was a lot. I heard gasps fill the room behind me as I wrote down every one I could think of. When I was finished, I turned to wide eyes and open mouths. It was like a nuke went off, blasting all their minds to glass.

“Not only do all of these words hold power, but they can also be used in many different combinations.”

“Balls is not a bad word,” an angel pointed out. “We play with balls all the time.”

“What if someone kicked you in the balls? I know me, I would say, my fucking balls! Fucking hell with this bullshit!”

There were less gasps and more writing on pads.

I looked at Nina. “And fuck Nina for being a bad friend!”

Nina lifted her head and her eyes blazed with power. “Fuck you! Why are you fucking picking on me!”

“There! You feel that! That’s your inner hatred. Use it. Focus on it. The curses will flow naturally with it,” I grinned.

“Fuck! All of this hurts my feelings!” Nina shouted.

“Fucking tell him, Nina!” an angel cheered.

“Don’t let that asshole talk to you like that!” another angel shouted.

I crossed my arms and nodded. “Gooood. Let the hate flow.”

“I want some fucking pudding!” another angel shouted.

“We all should have some fucking pudding!” three angels said at the same time.

“Motherfucking pudding is awesome!” a female angel shouted as she jumped to her feet.

“This is fucking great work,” Aithen said to me.

There was a moment where I thought I took it a step too far. But that moment went away as a chorus of curses and swears filled the room. Beautiful people unleashed curses like a symphony playing in Spiral City’s theater and music district. It was beautiful and heartwarming, seeing and hearing angels curse like sailors on shore leave.

I lifted my hands to signal everyone to calm down. The curses slowed and stopped. Everyone was smiling as they looked at me, their pads filled with notes.

“I think we have pudding cups in the kitchen. I’ll have some brought here for everyone,” I said before looking at Nina with kind eyes. “Since you were a good sport, I’m giving Nina an extra pudding cup. She earned it.”

“Fuck Yeah!” angels shouted with glee.

Nina’s eyes watered as her fellow angels patted her shoulders and back.

Aithen moved to my side. “That was some masterful work! Can you come back tomorrow to teach us how to curse and help fit in to take down evil?”

I nodded. “With great power comes great responsibility. Call my name, and I will be here.

“Now, let me get those pudding cups!”

I left the training room as curses began to fly again. I raced to the kitchen and grabbed a metal cart on wheels. I stepped to the fridge and opened the door. I walked in and my gaze fell on the pudding cups, right next to the burritos. Maybe if the people from Valis do very well, I’ll introduce them to the purity of the burrito.

I packed pudding cups and spoons on the cart. When it was filled, I turned and raced out of the fridge and the kitchen. I dashed through the main corridor. I reached the door and wheeled it in.

The cursing stopped as every angel turned to me with wide eyes and smiles.

“Fucking enjoy it!” I said as I started handing them out.

In a mere moments, the whole training room was filled with yummy sounds as angels enjoyed their pudding cups. Nina was all smiles, eating from one cup and having another one on her lap.

I bid my farewell as I rolled the cart out. Aithen bid me well before turning to the crowded room and beginning the next lesson on how to look evil, but not be evil.

I was whistling to myself as I returned the cart to the kitchen. When I left the kitchen and made it about ten feet down the hall, Nyx appeared from another corridor and smiled.

“I like happy you. Maybe we need to start every day like today?”

“I may hold you to that,” I grinned.

“Oooooo hold me down,” Nyx said before she grabbed my hand.

“But first, there is something we have to do,” the witch angel said as she pulled me down the corridor she just arrived from and toward a back door.

I was in such a good mood; I didn’t question it. I just followed like some love-sick fool. We stepped past the back doors and into the area out back of the hotel. Sunlight blinded me for a moment before my eyes adjusted. I glanced ahead to see a green zombie with spiky hair standing by the forest edge. He was wearing his green suit and jacket. His face was sunken in as he nodded to me as I approached.

I glanced to Nyx and then back to Sick, before glancing to Nyx again. “Um, what’s going on?”

Nyx let go of my hand, stepped a little further and stood beside Sick.

“The hotel has been keeping you too busy and considering the fight last night with a knightmare, we’ve been too laxed on your training,” Nyx smiled.

The witch angel put her hand on Sick’s shoulder. “I thought, to help further your training, I should ask Sick to help us get you to the next level.”

I looked at both of them and blinked. “Train with one of my heroes? Hell Yeah! I would also be training with Sick,” I laughed.

Nyx and Sick both started laughing. The three of us held our stomachs as the laughing fit continued for a moment. When we began to calm down, I wiped away a tear from my eye. I hate how stupid I become from being so happy.

“Bran, it would be an honor to help you become stronger. Urth needs strong heroes to keep chaos at bay,” the green zombie said with a gentle tone before his emerald eyes flashed with intent. “But understand this, I will not hold back. Nyx and I came to an understanding that to help your training, you need to be pushed to your limits.”

Nyx nodded. “You also have to learn how to use all of your new abilities. You need to be prepared if the knightmare comes back and he brings friends.”

I nodded. “Sounds good. Let’s start the training montage. I want to see what I can do so we can kick chaos’s ass into oblivion,” I smiled.

Twelve

Hey! Sisterhood! Leave those Kids Alone!

Training with friends can be an enlightening experience and a cautious one. You learn how to fight better, but you always hold back because you don't want to hurt the people you care about. It's a tightrope of trying to be better and not do something you know you will regret later. I know I have poor impulse control sometimes but seeing Nyx and Sick staring at me like I'm an enemy combatant is a little unnerving.

"Are you ready?" Nyx and Sick said at the same time.

I know I'm strong, but I also know I can lose control. I held onto the chain of friendship and hoped it was strong enough to not crack or break.

"I'm ready," I said with doubt touching my heart.

Nyx and Sick nodded before the pair of them blurred in two different actions. I could barely keep up as Nyx barreled toward me from the side with a fist cocked back and Sick opened his mouth. They really weren't holding back as they both came at me like a pair of anime villains with nothing to lose.

Nyx's hair flashed into blue flames as a green glob blasted out of Sick's mouth. My body reacted as my arm went up and blocked Nyx's punch. The air blasted out from the contact and my arm shuddered. Nyx grinned at me with glowing eyes, and I felt it, her power. She had been holding back the entire time we've known each other, and, in this moment, she was giving me a taste.

My body spun away as green glob shot past my head. I didn't activate my powers because I wanted to see how far this would go. Nyx leapt up at me as her hands were engulfed in ghost fire. Blue streaks rained down like small comets. My arms moved in a blur, blocking each strike and vibrations traveling along my arms. She was strong and fast. I could barely keep up.

“Stop holding back!” Nyx shouted as her arms and fists moved in blue blurs.

I was silent as I kept almost all her attacks at bay. Being dead, I had a lot of endurance. I could have kept blocking her for a while, except for her leaning into the attacks. If I kept this up, she was going to break my arms.

A green flash moved to my side as I parried Nyx’s attacks. I glanced from the corner of my eye, seeing Sick right next to me with his green fist cocked. I could barely react as one of my arms flashed down and parried his fist strike.

I wish I had another arm or three because that gave Nyx an opening. Fiery blue fists struck my chest in rapid succession. I felt every knuckle as she tenderized my chest muscles before pulling back one fist and striking me dead center in the chest.

I was lifted off my feet and launched backwards. I watched helplessly as Nyx and Sick rushed me, fists raised and ready to pound me into the ground.

Et tu, Nyx?

My legs swung down and slammed into the grassy floor. Dirt and grass shot into the air as I slid backwards to a stop. Sick and Nyx were nearly on me when I activated my Stable Overload.

I roared as my hair flashed into fiery blue flames. The world came into focus as my friends rushed me.

“Finally,” Nyx said as she launched into the air and a glowing, blue chain flashed into existence.

The world fell into slow motion as she pulled back her arm and snapped the chain forward. My hand shot up and grabbed the chain, the end of it wrapping around my hand. I pulled as Nyx landed.

Sick was to me with his mouth open. My left hand shot out and clamped on his neck. Sick’s green eyes bulged as I squeezed hard enough to prevent him from shooting that slime at point-blank-range.

A green boot blurred up and slammed into my stomach. I barely felt it as I lifted Sick off the ground.

“Justice is never blind,” I said in an otherworldly voice. Where the hell did that come from?

Sick swung his leg far back and slammed the toe of his boot under my chin. The blow was strong enough for me to let go of his throat and rise into the air about a foot. Sick was falling away as Nyx pulled her spirit chains. I was yanked off my feet and pulled toward the hot witch angel. Nyx lifted an arm and just as I was about to shoot past her, she slammed her elbow into my spine and slammed me into the ground.

The pain was muted, but it was there. She must have been using more of her strength than I have ever experienced.

“You’ll never be strong enough to defend the hotel if you keep holding back!” Nyx shouted like an angry banshee.

I planted my palms on the ground and pushed myself up. A green glob struck my hand and prevented me from pulling it off the ground. Nyx swung back her leg, ready to kick me in the face. Blue light and fire burned as my other arm shot up and caught her by the ankle. Nyx’s eyes flashed with power before I knocked her off her feet and swung her sideways. The witch angel went spinning sideways for about twenty feet before crashing to the ground.

“Forgive me,” Sick said before his green fist connected to the side of my head.

Pain flared as I found out that Sick was much stronger than his almost frail form would dictate.

Power pulsed through my form as I did a handstand on my stuck hand and rained a kick to Sick, sending him flying sideways and crashing to the grassy floor.

I looked at the green glob on my hand, keeping me stuck to the ground. I focused my ghost fire and flames ate away at the green jelly slime. I ripped my hand up from the slime when a glob struck my

face. I stumbled back as the world went dark. I fell into a defensive stance, knowing both were coming for me. I focused on my ghost fire hair, trying to eat away at the slime, but it wasn't happening fast enough.

A fist struck my side, and one struck the side of my head. The forces of the blows in opposite directions knocked me off my feet and I crashed down to the ground.

Rage, anger, fury, and power blasted every cell in my body. A madness crept into me as I was through being anyone's punching bag.

An image of the Dead Tree of Power filled my mind.

Lower Trunk
Ghost Fire
Spirit Sense
Unstable Overload
Life Touch

Higher Trunk
Stable Overload
Cold Flame Aura
Spirit Flight
Spirit Chains
Soul Reflect
Soul Armor
Spirit Steed

Decisions ticked off in my head and I summoned my power. Blue fire engulfed my entire body. It burned away the slime covering my face just as Nyx and Sicks' fists were aiming at me. My hands moved supernaturally fast as I caught each one. Power blasted out from all three of us and then Sick grunted in pain.

My glowing blue eyes turned to Sick, seeing my cold flame aura burning his hand up to the wrist. He grunted again as he planted his

feet and tried to pull away.

“Your soul speaks,” I said in an otherworldly voice. Seriously, I was creeping myself out.

Almost on automatic, I activated Soul Reflect. My eyes burned with blue power as Sick’s eyes widened. His knees shook as my flame aura continued to burn at him.

“I’m sorry. I only want to help you get stronger,” Sick said in a voice filled with sorrow.

Before I could respond, Nyx slammed her heel into my stomach. I bent in half as I let go. I moved like some supernatural robot, lifting my head to see Sick stumble back, clutching his burnt hand. Nyx was already moving toward me with blazing hands, eyes, and hair. A chain formed in her hand, and she whipped it around.

“Justice is not weak,” Nyx said in an otherworldly voice. It seems all witch angels have this weird, strangely serious side.

I knew deep down, the power I used on Sick would not work on Nyx. Witch angels have a resistance to each other’s powers. It was why Hilda was able to do as much as she could to nearly open a portal to the Grimm realm. But this also meant that we could truly unleash on each other.

The gloomy early afternoon sky filled the heavens as I squared off with the woman I loved.

“Love must surrender to justice,” Nyx said in a creepy, dark voice.

I bent my knees before I launched like a comet. Nyx stood her ground as blue armor appeared along her limbs and torso. It was sleek and thin, adhering to her perfect body. A smooth mask covered her face, except for her glowing eyes.

My fists opened and I stopped myself short of ramming my shoulder into her. I clamped my hands on the sides of her breastplate and lifted her up. Nyx looked down on me with serious eyes as I charged while holding her off the ground. She lifted a hand

and a small chain appeared. She whipped it across my face three times before I slammed her back against a tree.

Energy spilled from my broken nose as I stared at her. She lifted her arm up again to strike me when I pulled back a fist and slammed it into her chest plate. Nyx looked down with wide eyes, her chest plate was cracked and my knuckle imprints stayed behind as I pulled back my fist.

“Love and justice never surrender,” I said with a cold, dark voice.

An armored knee slammed into my stomach, but I remained steadfast with holding Nyx to the tree. Her spirit chain slapped across my face, and I simply glared at her. I pulled back my left hand, a spirit chain appearing in my palm. I swung it around and it moved like a possessed snake. It circled the tree and Nyx half a dozen times, trapping my love to the tree.

“Justice has won,” I said darkly as I let go and stepped back, the fight over.

Nyx’s mouth opened as a demonic scream filled the air. I watched with cold, glowing eyes as her arm and legs pushed against my spirit chains. She let out a long, hellish cry before my chains began to crack. Was she really going to break my chains with pure strength?

Glowing eyes grew brighter from the holes in her smooth mask before the chains holding her to the tree cracked and shattered into bits of blue light.

For one glorious moment, Nyx stood like a ghostly being of power. She stared at me for barely a breath before her armor vanished. Her fiery blue hair flashed back to blonde and purple streaks. The ghost fire along her fists winked out. She stood in her normal form before her knees trembled. A blink later she collapsed.

I flashed forward and caught her before she hit the ground. I sank down with her, holding her close as she let out a weak moan.

My overload ability faltered and then melted away. My body returned to normal as I held Nyx in my arms.

Nyx slowly blinked as her face was unusually blank. “You still held back,” she whispered.

Sick walked over, his burnt hand beginning to heal to the way it was. The green zombie hero looked down with compassionate eyes.

I stared down at Nyx and my heart ached. “I…didn’t want to hurt you,” I whispered.

Nyx closed her eyes. “No, it’s not just that. You’re stronger than any normal witch angel I’ve known. I felt it with your attacks. Something…else was fueling you, giving you a little more power.”

Nyx opened her eyes and looked into my eyes. “I should have been able to crush you, but you were able to stop me.”

“Maybe I’m just a quick learner,” I smiled.

Nyx gave me a weak smile. “It’s more than that. I…” Nyx trailed off as her body relaxed.

“I need to rest. Using so much power at once drained me,” Nyx managed to say.

I nodded as I scooped her in my arms and slowly stood up. Weakness tugged at my entire body. I may have been holding back, but that didn’t mean the fight didn’t take its toll.

I carried Nyx to the backdoor of the hotel with Sick beside me. He opened the door as I stepped in. Nyx closed her eyes as I carried her to the lobby stairs and started climbing them. I glanced back to the main desk, seeing Vanessa’s wide eyes as she watched me go up.

I shot Vanessa a small smile as I carried Nyx to my bedroom.

“You fought well,” Sick said at my side.

I nodded. “I’m sorry for what I did.”

Sick smiled. “No need to be sorry. You used your power to your advantage. It’s what we are supposed to do in difficult situations. I take no offense and the only reason I stopped was because Nyx couldn’t keep fighting.”

Sick walked me to the door as Nyx snuggled to my chest.

“Brandon, I haven’t fought many witch angels because we are on the same side. Fighting you was a learning experience I will never forget. Since Hilda went rogue, I must prepare for the eventuality another witch angel may break from their sacred duty. I am an ally for order and harmony.”

“Sick, you are a hero to me. Your heroic side has always shined when I read or saw your adventures on TV. I’m honored to have you as a guest at the hotel and helping me to discover my strengths.”

I smiled. “And please, call me Bran.”

Sick smiled. “Thank you, Bran. I think we both have a lot more to learn from each other. I may extend my stay here for a time if you don’t mind. I’ve had dreams that the nexus point under the hotel is enticing all manner of creatures to this location. I know you're strong, but even the strongest of us require allies to keep chaos at bay.”

“Hell yeah, um, I mean, that is super cool,” I laughed.

Sick nodded and smiled. “I’ll leave you to your rest. I will work with Lydia to ensure the hotel remains safe.”

Sick walked away as I stepped into my room and closed the door behind me. My muscles began to shake as I crossed the room and gently laid Nyx on the bed. She was passed out and was not moving. I took her hat and hung it on a bedpost. I then took off her boots and put them on the floor. She was still in her two-piece outfit with smiling pumpkins covering her breasts. I left them on as I began to get undressed.

I could barely keep my eyes open as I was down to my boxers. I crawled into bed and pulled a blanket over Nyx and myself. I settled down beside her. I grabbed her by the waist and pulled her close.

She made small, dreamy sounds as she snuggled to my chest. I closed my eyes and passed out.

Dark dreams writhed in the bleak landscape. I saw two skeletons lying in a pool of blood. Samhain was sitting by the edge of the crimson pond, his pumpkin head bowed and glowing eyes staring at the skeletons.

I stepped closer, wondering what I was watching. One skeleton was thicker than the other. It began to sink into the crimson pond as flames danced in the distance. The other skeleton lifted its upper body and reached over. It grabbed the larger skeleton by its boney shoulder and sank down with it. The thinner skeleton looked at me with hollow eyes before it too sank down in the red pond and vanished without a ripple.

Samhain bowed his head another inch, shadows painting his bulbous head.

“Samhain, what happened?” I asked.

Samhain’s form turned into red, yellow, and orange leaves before being whisked away with the wind. All that was left was me standing by the edge of the crimson pond.

“What the hell is going on?” I whispered.

The red pool bubbled.

I took a step back as something began to rise. Spikes penetrated the surface, before a red covered skull began to rise. Gray energy glowed from hollow eyes before a skeletal grin appeared.

“We miss you,” the red covered skull smiled before it blasted out of the crimson pool and flew toward me with an open mouth.

I was startled awake.

I glanced around, seeing that I was still in my room. The windows were dark, night had already fallen across this part of the

world. I sat up and looked down at my side, Nyx close and her eyes closed.

What the hell was that? Why was that skull so familiar? Why does it feel like I'm going crazy? I used to sleep as sound as a bug in a rug after eating a burrito. I never had nightmares for as far back as I could remember. A bloody skull should not have frightened me in the least, but the memory of it caused a tremble down my spine. Did the fight take too much out of me or was it something else?

A knock at the door woke me from my thoughts. Nyx's eyes opened and she sat up with disheveled hair. Before I could answer, the door opened, and Mara stepped in.

"I ran up here to let you both know, the Sisterhood envoy is here," Mara said with wide eyes.

Nyx and I jumped out of bed and were on our feet. I grabbed my clothes and began to get dressed as Nyx put her witch hat on and fixed it. Mara waited patiently until I finished. Nyx and I moved to the blonde zombie girl with urgency in our eyes.

"Where's Vanessa?" I asked first.

"She's hiding in the secret office behind the main desk. Vanessa, Lydia, and I were talking a little bit until Vanessa stiffened. She rushed into the hidden office before the envoy walked in," Mara answered quickly.

"Did the envoy say anything to you?" Nyx asked with keen eyes.

"She only said she was here to meet with the witch angels in charge and no one else. She's waiting in the lobby."

"I don't know, but I didn't expect her to be here so soon," I said as I blinked away the mental cobwebs.

Nyx turned to me. "The Sisterhood can be very direct. Meet her in the lobby and I will retrieve the Abomination Girls. I'll grab Sick and bring them down to the lobby. The envoy may want this exchange to happen as quickly as possible."

I nodded and looked at Mara, “Come with me. When we reach the lobby, make sure no guests come through. I’ll try to get the envoy into one of the side rooms so we can talk and make the exchange.”

Mara gave a single, strong nod.

Nyx and I turned to each other and looked into each other’s eyes.

“This is going to be quick,” Nyx stated.

“And hopefully not messy,” I said with a hint of concern. The hotel was filled with angels and necromancers. Anyone could walk by and be a spy for Todd, or anyone else who wants to get their hands on the Eye of Thull.

“But let’s make sure we do the exchange with strength and grace,” I said with confidence.

Nyx and Mara nodded in agreement.

The three of us stepped out of my room and made our way down the corridor. I looked ahead, seeing Sick leaning against the door that led up to the penthouse. He stood up and looked over to us as we approached.

“Sick, I need your help to escort the Abomination Girls to the lobby,” Nyx said firmly.

“Of course,” Sick said as he grabbed the door and opened it.

I watched as Nyx and Sick disappeared through the door and up the stairs.

I friggin wished the envoy would have called! This dropping in unannounced was bullshit of the highest order. What if I was in the shower, soaping my hair and singing an anime opening title song? Why does no one think of that? I have a life too. We all have lives!

I reached the second-floor landing and looked down to the lobby.

The jukebox played a classical tune. A woman in a red robe stood in the center of the lobby. Her hair was jet-black and tied into a

tight ponytail. Her skin was fair, and several freckles were on her cheeks. She was slender and her brow was firm. Her eyes were a piercing steel blue as she tilted her gaze upwards to me.

I can't explain it, but I could feel the confident experience she held in her eyes. It was like seeing a statue coming to life, cold and powerful. She didn't blink as Mara and I moved to the stairs and began our descent.

"Manager Brandon Ferryman, I assume," the envoy said with such a cold edge, my ears felt frostbite.

"I'm Brandon Ferryman. I never got your name?" I said as I was halfway down the stairs.

The envoy nodded. "Mother Shayla Conner of the Sisterhood. It is safe to assume the three individuals of interest are on their way down?"

I nodded as I reached the bottom of the stairs and approached her. I glanced to the side to see Lydia behind the desk with alert eyes. I turned my gaze back to Shayla as I approached. When I stood before her, I gave a slight bow.

Shayla made a slight bow before standing to her full height again. "I have a car waiting outside. Once the exchange is made, I will promptly leave. Once the item in question is safely locked away, you will be notified."

I tried my best, most charming smile. "Can we move to a side room to make the exchange?"

Shayla shook her head. "I'm not here for chit chat or any discussions. A simple exchange is taking place and nothing more."

Shayla glanced to the wall behind the front desk. "Why do I feel a familiar spirit close by?"

"The hotel is a weird place. We have all kinds of spirits," I smiled, trying to deflect from Vanessa being behind the wall.

Shayla gave me a measured look before turning and walking toward the desk.

“Mother Conner,” I said as I reached out for her arm.

Lydia moved over and leaned her back against the wall with the secret door. Shayla just stepped out of reach of my hand, circled around the edge of the desk, and stood before Lydia.

“I can sense one of my sisters behind the wall. Move, or I will move you,” Shayla said firmly.

“I’d like to see you try,” Lydia said and crossed her arms along her stomach.

I reached Shayla’s side, “How about we go to the bottom of the stairs and wait for the people of interest to be brought down?”

Shayla looked at me with hard, dark eyes. “Are you harboring a lost sister? If so, there are consequences for such actions.”

Dammit! She just let my inner asshole out.

“What kind of consequences? Like spankings or seeing you throw a tantrum? If it’s spankings, we can negotiate on who is doing the spanking.”

The air grew colder as Shayla stared daggers at me. “Manager Ferryman, I understand most, if not all witch angels are slightly mad, but this behavior will not help. Lost sisters are to be returned to the Sisterhood wherever they may be found. Much like any lost witch angel must be returned to any nexus point your people are guarding. Do not jeopardize the agreement between our forces under some blind assumption that a lost sister is somehow absolved of her duty.”

Shayla’s eyes narrowed. “Much like the previous hotel manager who was returned to your god. The Queen Mother has no hesitation to speak with Samhain to return one of ours home.”

“You might find that hard to do since we don’t have any lost sisters here at the hotel,” I lied.

“You lie poorly,” Shayla said with a low tone.

“And you’re too beautiful to be this stuck up,” I smirked.

Heat and pink touched Shayla’s cheeks. She looked away with a hard brow.

“Your undead charm will not work on me again. Witch angels can entice the dead, but I have overcome many obstacles in my career, including undead much more charming than you.”

“I bet you won’t say that after a couple of drinks,” I winked.

Shayla’s eyes glowed with rage. “Cretin.”

I kept my smirk. “Should we trade insults? Does frigid or stuck-up work for you? Oh, who am I kidding, let’s go a twofer,” I laughed.

“You people make me sick. Being dead and fighting against chaos is no laughing matter. Your people may laugh at death, but we at the Sisterhood must be the responsible ones for dire circumstances. If it wasn’t so, your god would not have us watching over such a powerful artifact,” Shayla growled.

“You people? What do you mean by you people?” I growled back but laughed in my mind.

Shayla parted her lips, ready to lay into me, when her gaze flicked back to the stairs past my shoulder. I turned around and smiled as Nyx and Sick escorted Lynn, Nora, and Amber down the stairs.

All eyes were focused on us as they came down at an even pace.

“We will settle this another time,” Shayla said as she stepped out from behind the desk and walked to the middle of the lobby. I followed and stood close by as everyone met in the middle. I glanced over to see Lydia staying right where she was against the hidden door. I turned my gaze to the side to see Mara stepping back to the main corridor but looking at the group.

“Look girls, it’s a sister bitch,” Lynn smirked.

Shayla gave an amused and confident smile. “How the mighty have fallen. The Abomination Girls have reached the end of their rope and need their enemies to bail them out. How cowardly of you three.”

Lynn’s eyes glowed with supernatural power. “How many sisters didn’t make it home because they fought us?”

Shayla’s amused smile dimmed. “If this exchange wasn’t so important, I wouldn’t simply kill you. I would imprison the three of you deep under Castle Stormholme for the next few thousand years.”

“You could try, but in the end, you wouldn’t survive,” Nora said as her painted white face shifted into an evil smile.

I stood between them. “Ladies, ladies, we’re not here to open old wounds. We are here for a simple exchange, nothing more, nothing less.”

Shayla gave a small nod. “The witch angel is right. Hand over the artifact and I will be on my way.”

Lynn looked the banshee up and down. “What are you going to do, just carry it? You know how corruptive its power is.”

“Show me the artifact and I will show you how I’m taking it from you,” Shayla said simply.

Lynn, Nora, and Amber looked at me.

“Do we have your word Samhain will honor the agreement?” Lynn asked me.

I nodded. “Samhain will honor it. I will make sure of it.”

The Abomination Girls looked at one another before making a silent nod. They turned their attention back to Shayla, but Lynn spoke to me.

“We believe and trust you, Manager Ferryman. That is why we are carrying through with the exchange.” Lynn said as she lifted a hand and snapped her fingers.

The air rippled above Lynn's hand. It shimmered and parted to reveal an arcane talisman with a slitted eye. I felt a small wave of dark power touch my senses, the amulet floating inches over Lynn's hand.

Shayla stared at the floating amulet before she nodded. She reached into the inner breast pocket of her robe and pulled out a small sack. The sack was covered in arcane runes as she opened it before them.

"This bag has been enchanted to contain the artifact. Put it in the bag and I will seal it. The bag will indicate if it is real and protect it until I bring it back home," Shayla explained.

Lynn gave me one more glance and I nodded. The sooner we were rid of it, the faster things could get back to bat-shit crazy.

The amulet floated forward and descended into the open bag. Shayla looked at the runes as they glowed, indicating the item was the real thing. Once the amulet was completely in the bag, Shayla pulled the leather drawstring and the bag closed.

The tension ebbed as Shayla put the bag in her inner breast pocket.

The banshee bowed slightly to the Abomination Girls. "Thank you for taking the first step to changing your fates. Maybe with Samhain's guidance and patience, you will be able to wash away the darkness that has clung to your souls for so long."

Shayla turned to me. "Manager Ferryman, I hope our paths never meet again."

"Never? I thought we were just starting to get along," I smiled.

Shayla gave me a dead stare before turning to everyone gathered.

"The artifact is now in the hands of the Sisterhood. Urth will be a little safer knowing we are guarding…" Shayla was cut off by an inhuman roar.

Bodies tensed as everyone looked around. Another roar filtered into the hotel as everyone turned their attention to the north side of the hotel, toward the nexus point forest.

“It looks like we are going to have to take a rain-check on that happy ending. Something is coming through the forest and I’m willing to bet a thousand soul pennies it’s not here for the buffet,” I said as power glowed under my skin.

Thirteen

Let's get Ready to Rumble!

"I wish you all the best of luck," Shayla said as she turned toward the front doors.

I blinked as another roar pierced the air. "You can't be serious! Something is out there, and chances are, it's coming for us!" I shouted as she walked away.

Shayla reached the door and rested her hand on the handle. She turned her head and looked back at me.

"Fighting chaos is important, but not as important as getting this artifact back to Stormholme," Shayla said before her gaze shifted to the three abomination girls. "For all we know, they summoned whatever monster is out there to take it back."

"We did not!" Lynn shouted.

Shayla shrugged. "It's not for me to know, only to complete my mission. I'm sure all of you will do fine."

I watched in muted disbelief as Shayla opened the front door, stepped out and closed it behind her.

Another roar touched the air.

I turned to everyone, ready to come up with a plan when Mara darted out of the east corridor and into the lobby. Her eyes were wide as she skidded to a halt.

"Giant monster!" the zombie girl shouted. "It's emerging from the forest!"

Music played from the jukebox as my eyes narrowed. In a weird way, Shayla was right. It's too much of a coincidence that a monster appeared right when we handed over the Eye of Thull. Someone was pulling the strings and I was betting it was Todd getting his evil on. Asshole is going to get what he deserves.

“Mara, make sure the guests are kept safely in the hotel. Nyx and Sick, you’re with me. Lydia, hang out by the back door and defend the hotel. Everyone else, get to a room and barricade yourselves in. We don’t know what’s out there and we don’t need anyone running out into danger,” I ordered.

“We can fight!” Lynna said as Amber and Nora nodded in agreement.

“I’m sure you can, but this isn’t your fight. This is a fight for the manager of the hotel. My job is to defend and keep everyone here safe. I can’t do that if I’m worrying about too many bodies on the battlefield,” I stated with a hard edge.

I started walking toward the northern corridor behind the stairs, which lead to the back of the hotel. Nyx and Sick followed. I heard Mara and Lydia begin moving people to the east wing. I wasn’t sure what to expect, but if it is a giant monster, it may have a difficult time getting into the hotel, unless it destroys it. I wonder if I get hazard pay for this.

I charged for the backdoor. My shoulder slammed into it, forcing it open. I launched out into the back and landed, arms and legs ready for anything.

The nexus forest writhed in the dark night. The trees swayed in the chilly breeze as something big and dark pushed its large head through the trees. Starlight lit up the area. My sensitive eyes drank in the sight as I took a step back.

When you’re a kid, you have certain obsessions. Some kids like toy soldiers. Other kids like dolls. Some like books. A select few like eating crayons. I obsessed over dinosaurs. I had books, toys, T-shirts, a fake dinosaur tail, the works. Imagine me, wishing I had a pet dinosaur so I could command it to attack people I didn’t like. It was a recurrent dream for many years and well into adulthood. I also liked the taste of crayons, but I liked dinosaurs more.

But to see a Tyrannosaurus Rex’s head poke through the medieval and mystical forest was not on my apocalypse bingo card.

To add insult to injury, it didn't look like a T-Rex from what I remembered reading. It had roughly the same size, but its maw was exaggerated and filled with sharp teeth longer than six inches. Its eyes glowed with a sickening green glow and its skin was covered in thick scales. Its colors were black and gray. With the way it looked, it appeared more demonic than what a normal dinosaur would look like.

"It's a beast from the Tempest Realm," Nyx said as she took a fighting stance.

"There's a realm with dinosaurs?" I said out the side of my mouth.

Nyx nodded. "Yes, but this one has been corrupted. It's not like the others I've seen."

"There's a lot to unpack there, but I have one thing to ask, is it dead or alive?" I asked.

Nyx's eyes narrowed. "We have a slight disadvantage since I can sense it is very much alive."

"Shit," I said as the bushes at the base of the forest began to move.

The T-Rex roared as it seemed to pull itself from the forest. It looked like it was struggling to break through to our world. Below the monster, reptilian humanoids stepped out with spears and swords. They were dressed in primal leathers and straps across their chests. Their eyes glowed the same as the T-Rex.

"Slyths," Nyx said as her eyes glowed with blue light.

I glanced over at Nyx as her hair flashed into blue fire. I took the hint and allowed my stable overload to take over. My hair flashed into a living blue flame. My eyes glowed with supernatural light. Power welled up along my entire being as I felt stronger and faster.

A slyth with a feathered headband stepped forward and pointed a spear at me. "Kill them all!"

I guess they're not here to make friends or sample the hotel's delicious cuisine. Shame, if they just sampled the burritos, I'm sure we all could live in harmony.

I glanced back at the hotel, seeing many eyes peering out from windows, filled with shock and awe. If the T-Rex didn't make it in, the lizard people would. Not on my watch!

Several dozen lizard people stepped out and fanned out from the original group. They all had the same glowing eyes and sharp weapons in their hands. The back of the hotel was rapidly turning into a rave, and I hate raves.

"Nyx and Sick, we are the line. Don't let any of them get past us," I said darkly.

My friends nodded in agreement.

"No matter what happens, it was an honor," I said with an otherworldly voice.

The T-Rex broke free of the dark portal holding it back. It roared as it charged, saliva dripping from its dagger sized teeth.

"I'm sorry, buddy," I said to the charging T-Rex as I broke into a charge to meet it.

Nyx and Sick were on either side of me as the three of us charged. The slyths roared and broke into a charge, trailing just behind the giant monster. Both sides crossed the small distance. Power continued to well up along my body as I kept my unblinking gaze on the giant charging monster.

The T-Rex's maw opened wide as thick, clawed feet pounded on the ground. Right when I was close enough to tell the monster had recently eaten, I made an impossible leap into the air as the monster's mouth clamped shut on nothing.

I soared overhead as a blue spirit chain appeared in my hand. It lengthened as I spun it in the air. The T-Rex lifted its head just as I brought my fist forward and the chain snapped down, striking the monster on the head and between its eyes. Power blasted the

monster as it swung its head to the side and bashed me out of the air.

I flew back and watched as Sick opened his mouth and a stream of steamy bile blasted out. The first few slyths were blasted off their feet and knocked down, screaming, and trying to wipe away the burning bile.

Nyx's body blurred forward. She slammed her shoulder into a large group of slyths, sending them flying in all directions. She didn't slow down, rushing into a dazed group and kicking one slyth in the chest so hard, they went flying into others, crashing, and knocking them down.

I righted myself in mid-air and landed on the ground, my boots sliding in the grass and dirt. I didn't hesitate to break back into a charge as the T-Rex roared and charged me.

"Not going to make the same mistake," I growled as I darted closer.

The T-Rex opened its maw, ready to bite me in half. I fell into a slide and slid just enough to the side for the monster's mouth to clamp down and miss me. I continued to slide under the beast as my chain flashed out and curled around a thick leg. I rolled to my feet and darted to the side, the chain over my shoulder.

"I learned this from the Empire Strikes First!" I shouted as the chain went taut.

Power surged and I grunted. I had no idea my strength limit, but this was going to put it to the test. T-Rex's were about eleven to fifteen thousand pounds, which puts it at about 7 tons, give or take. Despite the weight, I'm sure I could knock it off balance, I hoped.

The T-Rex lifted its head and turned it to the side when the spirit chain snapped taut and pulled a thick meaty leg. I roared as I dug my boots into the ground. The T-Rex stumbled as it lost its balance. It tried to regain its balance, but I was already moving.

My pants of quickness, mixed with my supernatural strength and speed poured into a soup of power. I darted around the monster, my chain following with me. The T-Rex regained its balance as I made one full rotation around it. The chain tightened around the legs, and I pulled with all my might. A tail whipped around and smacked me in the back, sending me flying forward and eating a bunch of dirt.

I licked my lips, liking the taste of dirt. The chain was still in my hand and I burst forth like a fiery comet on drugs. I pumped my legs as the monster clumsily tried to bite me in two. I managed to blast past him as I made another rotation. I was running out of chain and forced more power into it, making it longer.

I glanced to the side to see Nyx and Sick fighting and blasting slyths away. They were like a pair of drunk adults at a kid's party and the party went terribly wrong. Each punch sent slyths flying. Nyx grabbed spears in mid stab and shattered them by turning her fist. Other lizard people went diving for cover as Sick let out a torrent of his bile. The green stream blasted a slyth off their feet and sent them howling in pain into the primal forest.

The mayhem continued with the slyths falling or running back to the forest.

"We might win this," I said before the chain in my hand pulled me like a tow truck with the pedal to the floor.

I turned my head to see the T-Rex purposely falling and staring at me with demonic eyes. It opened its maw again, ready to bite me from the air.

Blue fire engulfed my body as teeth closed on me. I knew ghost fire can affect the dead and spirits, but it was a hail Margaret if it might affect a corrupted creature. When the ends of the teeth sank into my chest and stomach, the T-Rex's eyes flashed with pain and pulled back. My hand clamped on the top of part of its mouth and one boot slammed on the lower part of its mouth.

"No bitey bitey!" I shouted as I whipped the spirit chain in my hand and coiled it around the monster's large mouth.

It started to make sense after two more coils. The T-Rex was corrupted, most likely by Draygon or his people. That meant, my power would have an effect. I would have hated it if it was a normal dinosaur because then, it might have had a better chance at biting me in half. I leapt away from the open mouth and pulled it hard. The T-Rex's mouth clamped shut, blue chains keeping it closed.

I landed with a thud and turned. I stared as the giant monster struggled in my glowing blue spirit chains. It remained on its side, staring at me like I just kissed its girlfriend.

I smiled at the monster before turning to the battle. Nyx and Sick slowed their advance as the large group of slyths ran back into the nexus forest. Many of them dropped their weapons and some carried others who were unconscious. For all the size of their force and bringing a T-Rex, this was surprisingly easy.

Something slammed into my senses and penetrated my mind. Images played like a movie. I watched from the lobby as the front door opened and two figures stepped in.

"Bran, I'm showing you what is happening in the lobby," Holly informed.

My legs already began moving as I watched Todd and a man in a black hoodie step in. Hoodie guy had a pistol in his hand and shadows covering his face. Todd stepped in with a wide smile.

The secret door to the side office opened and Vanessa stepped out. Shock painted her eyes as the gunman lifted his pistol and aimed at her chest.

"Surprise!" Todd grinned.

The image fell away, and a loud bang touched my ears and soul.

"No!" I shouted as I charged for the back door.

Lydia was there with a pistol in each hand as I charged toward her.

"The hotel is being attacked from the front!" I shouted.

Lydia joined my side as we both barreled in. The door slammed inwards as we rushed in. The sounds of struggling and fighting filled the air as we charged out from behind the stairs.

I skidded to a halt as chaos bloomed in the lobby. Vanessa was in her banshee form as she flew into the air. A bullet hole gaped in her chest as she drew back a breath and screamed. A sonic wave blasted down, striking the gunman and knocking him off his feet. He crashed onto the floor as Todd turned toward the sonic blast. Black armor covered his body just as the sonic wave struck him. He took a step back and appeared undamaged.

“The gang's all here!” Todd said with vile showmanship.

Lydia’s guns were up, and she pulled on triggers. Todd stood his ground as bullets bounced off his armor. He laughed as bullets ricocheted off his armor and embedded into walls.

“I just needed to pick up a few things before I retrieve what belongs to Draygon,” Todd said like he was just shopping for leeks at a Wholesome Foods.

“I’m going to have to ask you to leave,” I said as I barreled toward him.

I was just within arm’s reach when a gun went off and a bullet struck my side. My first thought was to shrug it off, but a mountain of pain slammed into me. I was knocked off my feet and flew sideways into the wall by the bar. I landed on my feet, but the pain ripped at me. I turned to the gunman as he was sitting up and aiming at me.

“Finally, my revenge will be complete,” the gunman said as he slowly stood up and continued to aim at me.

A screech filled the lobby as Vanessa swooped down and grabbed the gun. She pulled it from the gunman’s hand and flew up. The gun pulled free from her hand and back to the gunman’s hand.

“Brandon, did I not introduce you to Peter Marks? He’s the guy who killed you as you killed him. How nice to see us all together again!” Todd laughed.

I clutched at my side. The pain was clouding my judgment. I could still feel the bullet inside me, and I had to get it out. Without thinking, my fingers stabbed into my wound and wormed around, trying to touch and grab the bullet.

Lydia stalked toward Peter, guns up. Light stabbed out from each gun as Peter turned his pistol on her. The two revenants unloaded on each other as they marched toward each other. Bodies shuddered from the impacts, but neither slowed down. When the guns clicked empty, Lydia slid her guns into her jacket and pulled out two short swords. Peter pulled out a fist full of bullets and, beyond belief, loaded them into his handgun all at once.

“I must kill him!” Peter shouted.

Lydia smirked. “Brandon, take care of the knightmare. I’ll take care of your revenant.”

I grabbed the bullet within me just as Lydia and Peter clashed. Lydia’s entire body moved like a stripper in a bar fight, with elegance and grace. Swords came at Peter from all directions as he fired off shots and parried blades with his gun. Sparks flew into the air as the two dealt each other damage, but neither one slowed down.

A bullet struck Lydia’s thigh. She didn’t slow down as she lifted her knee, tensed her thigh muscle, and the bullet shot up from her wound. A sword flashed and struck the bullet, the arcane round striking Peter against his forehead and causing him to take a step back. Lydia smiled as she advanced with short swords blurring into a storm. Peter parried each sword swing and thrust with his pistol at supernatural speed.

Todd turned to me, wearing his dark armor. Vanessa landed next to me. Long ears pointed through her hair as white eyes stared at the black knight.

“No need to defend your man. I’m not here for him tonight. I only came for what was stolen, but I need a little more power to ensure my success,” Todd said.

I pulled out the bullet and let it drop to the floor. My flaming hair and eyes glowed with power once again as I stood to my full height.

“Don’t be a hero. Heroes have bad medical,” Todd said as he stood about ten feet from me and Vanessa.

I lifted my flaming hands and cracked my knuckles. “I can’t hear you because I don’t listen to trash,” I said and took one step forward.

Todd’s eyes flashed from behind his helmet. “So many customers walked into my Seven Twelve, insulting or making snide remarks about my profession. I took the slings and arrows, hearing everything from get a real job to trash works at trashy places. Now it is my turn to cut away the trash and elevate Draygon’s chosen. You’re just a peon in the way.”

Black smoke poured from Todd’s open hand and a black sword emerged. He closed his fingers around the pommel and kept the sword to the side.

“The banshees are on their way to the airport. Once I have the Eye of Thull in my possession, maybe I’ll come back here and raze the hotel to the ground,” Todd said with a sinister tone.

“Over my dead…” I trailed off as mirror images of Todd began to appear.

At first there were two, which grew to four, which grew to eight, and then to sixteen, filling the lobby. Lydia and Peter stopped fighting and backed off each other as the lobby was filled with armored knightmares.

“…body,” I finished.

“Before you start trying to punch your way to imagined victory, these are not simply illusions. Each one is an exact clone of me, from my body and powers to my thoughts and fighting ability. Draygon has blessed me with many more abilities, but this one might do enough damage to end this farce once and for all.”

I heard a rumble of footsteps behind me. Me and Vanessa turned our heads slightly and glanced back. From the east wing

corridor, Mara charged out with a frying pan raised and black robed people behind her. Necromancers held up their hands in arcane gestures as an invisible cloak of death flowed with them.

From the stairs, Lynn, Amber, and Nora came down and took a battle stance. Dark energies surrounded their bodies as they called upon their power.

From the west wing corridor, beautiful people with angel wings appeared. Weapons made of light filled their hands and some of them had glowing golden armor on them. Aithen was leading the charge with Nina at his side. The pretty angel woman was armored like a war machine, a golden sword in each hand and armor covering her from head to toe.

“We got your back, Brandon,” Aithen said as he took a battle stance.

“We fight for you and all that is good!” Lynn shouted from the stairs.

“I came to fight, and the necromancers said I couldn’t fight alone,” Mara smiled.

“Recyclers are here to defend the hotel!” Barry Burns shouted and robed necromancers nodded in agreement.

I smiled as I turned my gaze to the gathering of knightmares. “You’re outnumbered. Retreat or I’ll be forced to revoke your soul and send it to the soul wheel.”

Todd’s shoulders trembled before laughter filled the lobby. All his clones began laughing like a clown parade through a bad part of town.

“This is too precious!” Todd laughed. “The good guys banding together to fight the evil invader of this prestigious hotel. If only everyone here understood how pointless such a stand is in these times. Urth is falling closer to chaos. The harmony of this world is broken. You are all nothing more than the walking dead.”

“You going to keep talking while we beat you to a pulp,” I said as I took another step forward.

Todd’s laughter died as he stared at me. “No. I’m going to walk out of here while you are all murdered. I’m going to retrieve the Eye of Thull and further tip the scales to chaos. I just need one thing before my victory is assured.”

I took another step closer with burning hair and eyes. “And what the hell would that be?”

Todd’s eyes flashed with a sickening green light, “More power.”

Grunts filled the air behind me. I turned my head to see the necromancers struggling to hold onto gem amulets around their necks. They cried out as straps and chains snapped and small, black gems with tiny red lights within them went flying into the air.

Todd lifted his armored arms and sword as black gems slammed into him. The gems sank into his armor, and it began to change. It grew slightly larger and took on longer, wicked edges.

“Chaos gems!” I said as I charged.

I reared back a fist when I was nearly to the knightmare. A wicked gauntlet shot up and grabbed me by the neck. I was lifted off my feet and slammed into the wall beside the bar. The impact caused cracks to appear and stab upwards along the wall.

“I wasn’t sure I could get back in here and have enough power to change the tide,” Todd growled. “You thwarted my attempt to smuggle larger chaos crystals with the delivery, but I found another way. By changing the necromancer’s venue and offering to pay for having one at the hotel, it was easy to unwittingly gift them chaos crystals. It boosted their power, but they didn’t use enough to drain them. Their natural connections to death and the dead masked my chaos gems. There are enough here to ensure my victory.”

I reared back a flaming blue fist and slammed it into Todd’s armored side. I pulled back and punched him in quick succession,

but his body didn't shudder, and his black armor still looked brand new.

"Draygon has plans for you," Todd hissed before throwing me like I weighed nothing.

I flew back and crashed against the stairs. My flaming hair wavered as I curled up and stood on the stairs.

"Time to go!" Todd said as he turned for the door, surrounded by mirror images of himself.

"Fuck their motherfucking asses up!" Nina shouted and led the charge.

Vanessa flew up, looked down, and screamed. Sonic waves slammed into the standing knightmares as they raised their arms in defense. Energies bounced off them. When Vanessa stopped her scream, black swords appeared in their hands as angels and necromancers crashed into them.

Black swords clashed with weapons made of light. Sparks and flashes of energy lit up the wide lobby. Mara charged in and slammed her frying pan across an armored head. Lydia dove into the melee, her swords clashing and slicing with expert skill. Angels slammed into the armored shoulders and parried sword attacks. Necromancers made arcane gestures before black bolts of energy struck knightmares and knocked several of them back.

Lynn, Nora, and Amber rushed into the fray. Lynn's form changed into green skin and tentacles forming along the lower half of her face. She grabbed a knightmare and slammed them into the floor. Amber chuckled like a mad woman as a yellow energy bolt flew from her forehead and slammed into a knightmare. The knightmare screamed as her mind tore the image's mind to pieces. Nora flew into the chaos, her hands weaving and illusions appearing beside her. The illusions swarmed the knightmares as she pulled out a dagger and stabbed one knightmare between plates of armor.

I watched as Todd slipped out the front doors and closed the door behind him. I leapt over the carnival of carnage as bodies pushed and battered at each other. When I was halfway across the lobby, a bullet struck my chest and spun me out of control from the air.

I crashed into two knightmares. My flaming hands each grabbed one. I picked them up and slammed their heads together so hard, their bodies shattered. I turned as pain roared along my chest, to see Peter walking toward me with his gun raised and aimed at me.

“I was just trying to feed my family and you took me away from them!” Peter shouted as he pulled the trigger.

Another bullet struck my chest and I stumbled back to the wall. “You shot me!” I shouted.

Peter took another step forward, “You should have just called the ambulance! You should have tried to save my life!”

The gun went off and another bullet struck my chest. Pain turned into a tsunami of torture. I could barely think as his bullets were burning in my chest. Despite my strength and speed, his gun and bullets hurt me.

Peter walked right up to me as chaos reigned around us. He placed the end of his arcane gun to my forehead and his finger hovering over the trigger.

“Now I get to finish this dark business. I get a chance to move on and maybe see my family again in another life,” Peter said with tears in his eyes.

I looked at him with calm eyes. I pushed away the pain as my glowing eyes returned back to normal.

“Peter, I’m sorry,” I admitted.

Peter blinked as he kept the gun to my head.

“I should have called an ambulance. I should have tried to save you. But it’s never too late to right a wrong,” I said with a serious

tone.

Peter nodded. “All will be right when you’re dead.”

“I’m already dead,” I said before glowing power filled my eyes again.

Peter’s eyes widened as I flexed my chest muscles with supernatural power. The three rounds in my chest were squeezed and shot out of my chest. One struck his arm, jerking it away as his arcane gun went off. The other two bullets struck his chest and caused him to stumble back.

I launched from the wall and slammed into Peter. We both crashed down to the floor as ghost fire filled my hands. It burned at the revenant as he tried to put the gun to my side.

“Peter,” I said in an other-worldly voice, “Let me help you move on. Let me free you from this pain.”

Peter hesitated with his finger on the trigger. We stared at each other as the knightmares were being cut down around us. I watched him, waiting for his answer. I didn’t want to do it unless he wanted me to. If he denied me, we would continue this fight until one of us lost. If he agreed, I might be able to heal both of us.

Peter gave me the barest of nods. “Do it,” he whispered.

I nodded as my ghost fire blazed hot. I touched the side of his head as I called upon my cold flame aura. The two of us were engulfed in azure flames.

I stared at Peter as he smiled. He closed his eyes as blue flames washed over him. In seconds, he turned into ash. The ash flew up before vanishing into nothing.

And just like that, he was gone. I felt his soul fire off into the cosmos, barreling toward the soul wheel.

I launched myself to my feet. I was a ball of ghost fire as I grabbed the remaining two knightmares. I slammed one into the other. I leapt on them as everyone else backed off. My flaming fist

slammed into an armored chest and caved it in. The mirror image vanished as I jumped to my feet and drove my boot down on the other one's chest. The mirror image of Todd cried out before he was dusted to nothing.

I turned to everyone in the lobby. Everyone was heaving. Some angels were bloody. Several necromancers tended to their fallen brethren. Lydia helped Mara back to her feet as Vanessa floated toward me.

I smiled at the banshee before I remembered Todd. I turned and charged out the front doors.

Todd was sitting on a black, skeletal horse. He was fully armored and glowing with a sick green power. He turned his armored head to me.

"You beat my illusions, but you will not beat me," Todd shouted before snapping the reins.

The black skeletal horse reared up on its hind legs before blasting onto the road. It moved far beyond the power of a normal horse as it left black flames in its wake.

Shit!

Fourteen

Ride and Die!

I lifted a hand and snapped my fingers. The wind howled through the night air as a blue ring of fire appeared nearby. A wheel of ghost fire appeared. It connected to bones as my spirit steed reared up. The front wheel slammed down as I approached. The demonic skull between the handlebars glowed with supernatural light as I swung my legs over and sat.

The front doors to the hotel burst open and bodies spilled out. Vanessa flew up into the air and looked down on me with white eyes. Angels and necromancers poured out. The Abomination Girls were among them, looking around for the threat. Lydia and Mara flowed with the crowd, the revenant with submachine guns in her hands and Mara holding her frying pan.

I was about to rush off after Todd when Nyx and Sick came out with the crowd.

“Brandon!” Nyx shouted as she cut through the crowd to the front with Sick at her side.

“Todd’s going after Shayla and the artifact. I have to stop him,” I said in a deep, other worldly voice.

Nyx nodded and lifted a hand. Power surged as a ring of blue fire appeared and a skeletal horse head rose.

“I’m coming with you,” Nyx said calmly as her spirit steed rose from the fire circle to its full height.

“So am I,” Vanessa said with a ghostly voice as she hovered about ten feet in the air.

I nodded to Nyx and Vanessa before turning my gaze to the battered group of angels, necromancers, Abomination Girls, Lydia, Mara, and Sick.

“Lydia, Mara, and Sick, watch over and protect the guests,” I ordered.

The three of them gave me a firm nod.

I turned my gaze to Nyx as she mounted her steed and Vanessa hovered in the air. “Let’s go hunting,” I said before my bone bike blazed with power.

The pulsating power between my legs charged my resolve as I blazed onto the road and streaked into the dark. Nyx’s steed was next to me as we left twin ghost fire trails behind us. Blue fire for hair whipped in the wind as I increased speed.

Vanessa flew high above like a ghost. She was silent as a tomb as she kept up with us.

I didn’t know how far Shayla was ahead and how quickly Todd was going to reach her. The chaos crystals he absorbed roided up his power. I wasn’t sure how we were going to beat him, but the three of us should be enough if we kept him busy. It was more important to help Shayla get away than beating down Todd, but I had to admit to myself, I was going to enjoy punching in his stupid face.

Memories slipped among my thoughts as Nyx and I blazed down the road. Faint images of Todd’s blank expression as he sold me burrito after burrito for years. I had no idea he was some secret cult member to Draygon. Before recent events, I had no idea there were dark gods interfering on Urth. It was odd enough with superheroes, supervillains, a portal off the south coast that led to a world filled with pirate elves, and sea monsters. But now I was chasing a knightmare on a black skeletal horse who used to be my burrito dealer. I didn’t understand how this insanity fell on my shoulders but dammit, I was going to do the best job I could because, deep down, I knew I wanted to make the world a better place. I don’t have an ego big enough to save the world, but if I can save one soul, it was enough for me to sleep at night. What happened to me? This thinking about others and doing the right thing? It felt natural and unnatural at the same time and if I wasn’t in a race to save a banshee with a powerful

artifact that could tip the scales to chaos, I would probably be throwing up on the side of a road like a hazed frat boy and moaning, “Please Sir, may I have another!”

Nyx’s steed galloped with each burning hoof blazing with azure flames and leaving a trail behind them. I glanced up to my girlfriend and she looked ahead, her hair burning under her bent witch hat and eyes blazing with blue power.

“What happened to the T-Rex?” I asked with a deep voice.

“Sick and I pushed it back into the forest. The forest absorbed the corrupted monster back to the Tempest Realm,” Nyx said as she focused ahead.

I turned my head and kept my eyes on the road as trees blurred at our sides. “There’s a realm with dinosaurs? We may have to go realm hopping soon.”

Nyx nodded with a wicked smirk. “It’s a date.”

I stared ahead and couldn’t see Shayla or Todd. How far ahead did they get? We were moving fast. Since I had a point of reference of where we were in Northvale, I assumed they were headed to Pine Airport, which was fifty miles away.

Vanessa flew down and stayed above me and Nyx. “Shayla wouldn’t have come here alone. She will have other sisters with her for added protection,” Vanessa said in a ghostly voice.

Nyx’s smirk vanished as she spoke, “Death energy is a double-edged sword for banshees. You feed on it, but it is also your weakness if used as a weapon. Vanessa, you might want to stay back as Brandon, and I finish the knightmare off.”

Vanessa shook her head. “I will not hold back.”

I glanced up to Nyx, “Double edged sword? That is why he really wanted so many chaos crystals close by, so he would have enough power to overpower Shayla?”

Nyx and Vanessa nodded.

“Mothers are very powerful in the Sisterhood. Todd needs the death energy boost to give himself a fighting chance. Screams have less power against death energy, and we cannot feed on it if it’s under someone’s control,” Vanessa explained.

My eyes narrowed. “Let’s see how well he does against a ghost fire knuckle sandwich.”

“Brandon, just remember, Todd is a follower of Draygon. Sometimes, the dark gods will grant greater powers to their followers in their time of need. Draygon wants this artifact back and they will do anything to get it,” Nyx cautioned.

“Let the fucker try,” I hissed as my bone bike blazed with power.

I pressed on, moving into the lead as we raced down the empty dark road. My flaming hair left a streak of light as my willpower alone caused me to move faster. I stared ahead, knowing I would have to bring my A game to the fight.

Trees continued to blur past us as we powered ahead. The hum of the bike calmed my senses. When the dark road fell into focus, I spotted a galloping black skeletal horse and its dark rider. Todd’s attention was fully ahead of him. I shifted my gaze to further up the road and spotted a limousine charging ahead in the distance. I didn’t have a speedometer, but I knew we were all pushing over a hundred miles per hour.

“I’ll slow him down,” Vanessa said overhead before flying past me.

“Vanessa, don’t,” I said but it was too late.

The banshee’s long dress flapped in the wind as she opened her mouth and took a deep breath. Todd turned his armored head and glanced with one eye behind him. The black sword in his hand collapsed on itself and reformed into a black crossbow. He turned his upper body and aimed as Vanessa screamed.

A cone of sonic waves blasted down and struck the knightmare on the back. Todd and his steed shifted from the blast, but it seemed

to barely affect him as he pulled the trigger. A black crossbow bolt shot through the air. Vanessa stopped screaming at the last moment before she twisted her body away and the bolt missed her by inches.

I gritted my teeth as I forced my bike to blaze faster. I held out my right hand and a glowing, blue chain appeared. It moved to my will, flowing in the air like a snake under my control. The chain grew longer and longer as Vanessa flew over the knightmare and unleashed another scream.

Todd re-aimed and pulled the trigger as a sonic wave hit him. The bolt went wild as he tried to correct himself from the blow. Vanessa poured on the screams, filling the night air with her haunting voice.

The sunroof on the limo slid back and two robed banshees flew out, one after the other. They hovered over the speeding limo as they opened their mouths and unleashed a torrent of screams.

Todd crossed his arms as he was struck with sonic waves. Vanessa joined the chorus, her scream blasted down and striking Todd's back. I heard a grunt as his black skeletal steed wavered on the road.

For a tiny moment, I thought the banshee screams were going to knock him off his steed or cause the steed to crash onto the road. I readied to tangle him up in my chains when darkness shifted and spread out from his shoulders. Before my glowing eyes, Todd had six arms and each one was carrying a black crossbow. He aimed two at each banshee and let out a wicked chuckle before pulling their triggers.

Bolts flew in a blink. Each of the guardian banshees took both bolts to the chest. They flew to the sides and grabbed at the bolts. They pulled them out and threw them aside.

A bolt shot past Vanessa, but the second one struck her neck. Vanessa grasped at it as she lost her concentration and fell.

My spirit chain flew up and wrapped around her. With a heave of my arm, she flew down to me and I caught her with both arms. I grabbed the bolt at her neck, pulled it out and tossed it aside. Vanessa looked at me with wide, white eyes as the hole in her throat began to heal.

I looked down on her and smirked before I noticed I wasn't controlling my bike. I glanced down to see we were still blazing ahead, my spirit steed taking over.

"You okay?" I asked Vanessa in a dark voice.

"I am…now," she said as her voice started to return.

I looked ahead to see Todd aim his arms and crossbows at the two banshees and the limo. Trees whipped by as he pulled triggers.

The banshees unleashed screams and were quickly stopped as bolts penetrated their throats. Two bolts flew at the limo with one striking the trunk and another hitting a wheel. The tire blew and the limo weaved from side to side. The two banshees shifted their gaze to the out-of-control limo and several black bolts hit them. Both banshees were thrown from the air and crashed into trees on either side of the road.

The limo's remaining tires screeched as the entire vehicle tilted to one side. I watched helplessly as the limo ran off the road and crashed headfirst into a thick tree. Todd's horse slowed as his six arms became two, each one holding a black crossbow.

"Sorry about this," I said to Vanessa before heaving up and throwing her into the air.

Vanessa flew into the air as I spun my spirit chain. Todd turned his armored head to me just as my chain whipped out and hit him dead center on the side of his head. Todd's head bent to the side as I flashed past him.

I leaned into a turn and my bone bike skidded, leaving a trail of blue flames in its wake. I turned to see Nyx rushing the mounted knightmare with her own chain swinging in her hand.

“Hardly seems fair,” Todd said in a dark tone as he aimed both crossbows at Nyx and pulled triggers.

Nyx’s chain spun into a shield, knocking away the black bolts. The witch angel jumped onto the saddle with her feet, bent at the knees and launched herself into the air. Her eyes and hair blazed bright as she swung her chain down and hit a crossbow. The black crossbow flew from Todd’s hand for a few feet before it was pulled back by some invisible force. It slammed back into his palm as he aimed both at the falling witch angel.

Triggers were pulled and black bolts shot forth. Nyx’s boot just touched the road when both bolts struck her.

I launched off my bike as everything moved in slow motion. Nyx grabbed at both bolts sticking in her chest. Just as she was about to pull them out, they pulsed with dark power and exploded.

The black explosions hurled Nyx backwards. Her back hit a tree and she fell into the tall grass.

“Maybe I should have announced what I was firing first,” Todd laughed before a chain smacked the back of his head.

Todd turned back to me as I approached with a spinning ghost chain in my hand.

“Hey fuckhead! Want to see how we do things downtown!” I said with an otherworldly voice.

Todd chuckled as he brought his leg over and dismounted. He landed on the road beside his skeletal steed. One crossbow melted into his arm as the other one shapeshifted into a long sword.

“Draygon has forbidden me from slaying you, but that doesn’t mean I can’t beat you into submission,” Todd said as he stepped away from his steed and faced me.

I glanced to the side to see Vanessa fly down to Nyx and sit her up. Nyx moaned as she had two gaping holes in her chest. Even at the small distance, I could see them beginning to heal, but it still burned at me that this fucker hurt my girlfriend.

“What’s the matter, Brandon? You’re going to join her in a moment, sitting on the road and wondering how your afterlife reached this point,” Todd chuckled.

“You are a follower of chaos and must be brought to justice,” I said as I took measured steps toward the knightmare.

“Chaos is natural, just like harmony. You have no domain over me. Step aside or I will break you like when your parents broke your heart after they left you.”

I stopped my advance. “What the fuck did you just say?”

Todd’s armored shoulders bounced to his chuckles. “You really are a buffoon. Spending so much time feeding that hole in your heart with those disgusting burritos. I still don’t know why Draygon wants you to still exist, but I follow my god’s commands.”

“Funny, I don’t follow such a command,” I smirked as I started walking toward him again and spinning my chain.

“Draygon has gifted me with knowledge, spells, and power! What has Samhain done for you? He put you to work in some hotel. With your power, you could do more than serve others. I bet you don’t know that once a deity gives you power, it’s harder for them to take it back. You could raze the world and we can sit on thrones of bones, shifting the balance of this realm to chaos,” Todd said, and green light glowed from the eyeholes of his armored visor.

“I already chose team Samhain. Now, I must take out the garbage,” I growled before I drew my arm back.

Todd lowered his center of gravity with sword in hand. My chain arced forward. An armored forearm shot up and the end of the chain curled around it. Todd and I pulled as his other arm whipped forward and let go of his sword. It shot across the fifteen feet between us and before the tip reached my stomach, I grabbed the naked blade with my left hand.

Tendrils of death energy stabbed into my hand as I clamped down on it, stopping the point from penetrating my stomach. It hurt

as dead muscle and bone held the black blade. I moved to toss it away and it flew from my hand and back to his. I glanced at my hand, my fingers on my left hand barely connected and hanging.

“You have the tact of a vending machine,” Todd growled as he whipped his sword up and shattered a link to my chain.

The two of us stumbled back once the tension in the chain was broken. My chain spun and grew longer just as Todd charged at me. When he was within five feet, my chain snaked out around his leg. I pulled to trip him up when he shifted his weight, bent his knees, and launched into the air.

I let go of my chain or I would have gone with him. He soared about thirty feet into the air before his sword shifted into a crossbow. When he began to fall, he pulled the trigger.

The black bolt shot down and my hand moved in a blur, catching it before it struck my chest. It pulsed with power as I tossed it back to the falling knightmare. Todd’s eyes glowed bright before a black explosion struck him and sent him crashing down to the road.

I called upon my cold flame aura. The fiery blue light snaked along my chain as I approached the fallen knightmare. Todd scrambled to his feet and took a battle stance, crossbow shifting into longsword again.

“I’ll apologize to Draygon after this is over. I’m sure the dark god will understand it needed to be done,” Todd growled before charging.

I stood my ground as my blazing chain spun. I whipped it at the charging knightmare, the weighted end striking his armored chest. Ghost fire blazed and exploded. Todd stumbled back a step but was still standing.

Purpose took over as I kept my distance and swung my chain like a rabid sea serpent. It whipped and arced down, slamming into the knightmare many times. Todd couldn’t react as mini explosions rippled along his armored body. He took a step back at a time as I unleashed metal fury on him. I advanced, not letting up. Pieces of

black armor were blasted off him. His sword was knocked from his hand. A crack formed along his helmet. When I was close enough, I lifted my arm up and my chain flowed up with it. I brought my arm down and the chain hit his armored head, dead center. The helmet cracked and split in a flash.

I stared as light filled my eyes when something stabbed at me from behind. I looked down at a black sword point exiting out of my stomach. The knightmare before me faded away and I turned my head to see Todd behind me.

“Draygon is the master of illusions and I am one of his chosen,” Todd whispered before twisting the black blade.

I grunted as my aura flashed to nothing. My chain disappeared as I grabbed at the sword point, trying to stop him from turning it. My fingers healed on my left hand just to be cut again as I tried to stop the blade from turning. Screaming pain bit deeper as my insides and palms were sliced open.

An armored hand struck the back of my head with the power of a truck. I was thrown forward, the sword slipping from my body. I crashed onto the road and turned onto my back as Todd approached me with his sword pointed at my chest.

“When I slay you, it will prove to Draygon he doesn’t need you. He will see that I was always stronger, smarter, and more powerful than his pet project.”

“You’re one of those assholes who loves to hear his own voice,” I grunted as I crab walked back from the approaching sword point.

“Years of silence working at the Seven Twelve can cause one to lose hope. My death released me from such social constraints. Where I was a nobody behind a counter, I am now a knightmare who will watch the world burn in black fire. I will be a general in Draygon’s armies as we conquer realms, one after the other,” Todd said with dark confidence.

“Not if I have anything to say about it!” I shouted as I activated my soul armor.

Glowing blue armor plates appeared and settled over my body. Gauntlets appeared over my hands, pulling my fingers into place and holding my palms closed. The ghost armor covered my body from head to toe.

Todd’s eyes flashed as he stabbed at my chest. The black sword struck my chest plate but didn’t penetrate.

“Fucking outstanding,” I whispered to myself as I knocked away his sword and stood up.

Todd took a step back and pointed his sword at me, “This isn’t supposed to happen! Witch angels don’t gain higher abilities so quickly after death!”

“I want to thank the academy for believing in me. I couldn’t have done it without my friends and Samhain,” I chuckled as a glowing chain formed in my hands.

Todd growled before he charged me. My chain whipped up and I grabbed it with both hands. The black sword slammed down on the chain but didn’t break it. I curled the chain around his sword and pulled. The black sword flew from his hand as I let go of the chains. Todd called back his sword, but the ghost chains circled around it and the ends clamped onto the street.

“Speaking of spells, I cast FIST!” I shouted and rammed my armored knuckles into Todd’s armored head.

The knightmare stabbed a leg out to keep himself from falling. He was met with gauntlets slamming into his head. Todd kept himself up as he slammed his fist into my armored ribcage. Shockwaves blasted out as the two of us unleashed armored punches like a bunch of mechanics in a street brawl.

Death energy and ghost fire exploded as we rained down attacks on each other. Every punch shook the air, but there was little to no pain as our armors absorbed the damage.

Todd grabbed me by my breastplate. I slammed a boot into his knee, and it buckled, but not enough to stop him from lifting me up and slamming me down on the street. On the ground I elbowed his helmet and he stumbled aside, dragging me with him. He heaved as he picked me up and threw me like a ragdoll. I spun through the air before hitting a small tree on the side of the road and shattering it to kindling.

“You can’t beat me,” Todd said darkly before turning to the smoking, crashed limo. “Time to retrieve my god’s artifact.”

I was rising as a door to the limo opened up. Shayla stepped out as Todd marched toward the limo. The banshee took in a breath and let out such a scream, it blasted leaves off every tree in the area. The cone of sonic power struck Todd as he raised an arm. He barely slowed down as he stepped into the banshee’s scream. His armor cracked as he pushed on toward her.

Shayla’s eyes widened as the knightmare didn’t slow down. When her power drained, she stopped her scream and took another breath.

“The sisterhood will have a few less banshees after I’m finished here,” Todd sneered as he approached.

Shayla was about to scream again when blue light touched her white eyes. Todd stopped his advance and turned his head just as I was on him. I grabbed his helmet with one hand and rammed my armored fist into the back of it. Todd’s elbow slammed into my side hard enough to crack my armor. I continued to ram my fist into his helmet as cracks further stabbed out.

“Off of me!” Todd shouted as dark power enveloped him.

A black explosion blasted out and I was knocked back a few feet. My boots slid to a stop. My arms were crossed, and I just lowered them when Todd’s fist slammed into my armored face.

My head snapped back before a fist slammed into my armored stomach and bent me forward.

“Your power is just slowing down the inevitable,” Todd said darkly as he pulled back an armored fist.

“You talk like a second-rate villain from a B movie,” I hissed as I jabbed my fingers into the soft spot of his neck, between armor plates.

I threw my shoulder into it with all the power I had. To a normal person, it would have collapsed their windpipe and ruptured an artery. With the kind of power between us, my fingers stabbed through the soft flesh and struck a neckbone. The power behind it cracked his supernatural bone. Todd stumbled back as his head bobbled like a fucking bobblehead on a dashboard.

I launched at him, and my hands clamped on the sides of his wicked helmet. Undead muscles bulged with supernatural power as I pulled. The helmet cracked further as a black dagger formed in Todd’s hand. He drove the dagger into my side with quick, deep attacks. The dagger penetrated my cracked armor and stabbed deep, pain arcing along my nerves. I ignored it as I let out a primal shout and pulled Todd’s helmet apart.

Todd slowly blinked in disbelief as his face was exposed. Each side of the helmet went flying from my hands as I let go. I clamped my hands on the side of his head and summoned my Soul Reflect power.

“Justice for your soul,” I said darkly as blue light stabbed into Todd’s green, glowing eyes.

I saw what Todd saw. A man stood over him with a bloody fist and a fury in his eyes. Todd was holding his hand up as blood dripped from his nose.

“You are nothing to me! I only tolerate your mother because she gives me great head. Other than that, you are both trash and when I’m done with her, I’ll toss you both in the gutter, where you belong!”

“I’m strong! I’ll take care of her!” Todd screamed back with a young voice.

The man laughed. “A weakling like you will never be strong for as long as you live. Take your beating like a man and maybe you’ll learn something,” the man said before pulling his fist back and slamming it into Todd’s face.

Reality fell back into place and Todd let out a soulful cry. Power surged and exploded between me and the knightmare. We were thrown apart and crashed onto the road.

I sat up, an ache filling my entire body. I looked across the small distance to Todd sitting up with tears streaking his cheeks.

“Fuck you, Brandon Ferryman!” Todd whimpered before he stumbled to his feet.

I struggled to get up as Todd’s image shimmered. He darted for the woods. When he reached the edge of the inky dark forest, he faded from view and vanished into the night.

I stood to my full height and my armor faded away. My hair flashed back to normal and ghost fire faded away. I turned to the side to see Vanessa helping Nyx walk toward me. Nyx smirked as Vanessa held her up with wide, white eyes.

From a little further up the road, two banshees slowly made their way to us. I turned to the crashed limo to see Shayla helping the dazed driver out of the driver’s seat. When he was out and sitting on the road, Shayla turned to me, Nyx, and Vanessa. Her eyes narrowed a little at the sight of Vanessa before looking at me.

“Thank you, Mr. Ferryman,” Shayla said.

I nodded. “Don’t mention it. It’s what we witch angels do,” I smiled.

Shayla nodded and turned her attention to Vanessa. “I should drag you back home.”

“I will not go back. I belong out here,” Vanessa said defiantly.

Shayla nodded and smirked. “Because you aided witch angels to thwart a dark plot, it may be in the Sisterhood’s best interest to help

guard the innocent out here. I will not mention you back home, but if you ever desire to come back, I'll make sure you can without incident.

"In the meantime, keep fighting the good fight."

Vanessa smiled. "I will."

I looked around at everyone. "I assume you have a plane waiting at the nearest airport. Need a lift?"

Shayla smiled. "We can fly there, but the driver will need a ride. We can't leave him out here in the middle of nowhere."

Nyx moved to my side. "It would be our privilege to escort you the rest of the way, just to be sure."

I summoned my bone bike closer and looked at Shayla. "Let's get going. There are half a dozen burritos calling to me from the hotel and I don't want to disappoint them," I smiled.

Fifteen

You Can't Handle the Truth!

We pulled up to the hotel. Vanessa was behind me, hugging me around the waist. She resisted getting off, content to hold onto me. Nyx dismounted from her steed and looked over to me and Vanessa with loving eyes.

"Vanessa," I smiled.

"Okay, she said sheepishly, "but I will need extra cuddle time in bed."

"I think we can all agree to that," Nyx laughed.

Vanessa let go and we both dismounted my spirit steed. Blue fire engulfed my bone bike and Nyx's skeletal steed before they sank down into the ground. Memories washed on the shores of my mind of seeing Shayla and her fellow banshees, and us reaching the airport and a waiting private plane. Shayla was cordial, saying a quick goodbye before boarding the plane and not bothering to look back. We said our goodbyes anyway before getting back on our spirit steeds. Vanessa didn't need to sit behind me, but did it anyway, hugging me close. We left in a hurry as the plane turned and made its way to the runway.

On the road, we looked up as the plane was airborne a short time later and flying east.

The ride back was quiet. Todd escaping didn't sit well with us, but there wasn't much we could do. We had no idea where he went, but I was sure as shit that he would pop up again like a bad soul penny.

I was back in the present as we climbed the small set of stairs in front of the hotel and opened the door.

We walked into a crowded lobby. Everyone was there from angels to necromancers. Some were sitting on the stairs and others

were mulling about, talking and with drinks in their hands. When we entered, they all turned their heads to us and smiled.

“Did someone authorize this party?” I smirked.

Drinks and cheers filled the air at our triumphant return.

Lydia stepped from the crowd and approached me. “Everyone is safe and accounted for. We treated the wounded, but that’s not the big news.”

“What’s the big news?” I asked.

Lydia kept her blank expression, “You have a visitor waiting in the bar. He said when you arrived, he wanted to see you alone.”

I blinked. I turned and looked at Vanessa and Nyx. Vanessa simply stood and Nyx shrugged.

I guess it was important. I turned and walked toward the bar archway as the jukebox played music. I stood in the archway when I looked to a corner and saw Samhain sitting at a small table with two glasses and a bottle in the middle.

The god turned his jack-o-lantern head to me and gave me a small nod. “Mr. Ferryman, well done on completing your assignment. Please have a seat.”

My heart dropped in my chest. Despite the quick congratulation and a bottle on the table, I had a sinking feeling that this was not just going to be a pat on the back.

I stepped over to the small table and sat down. Samhain stared at me with unblinking yellow eyes. Reality began to shift and slow, just like when he first arrived nearly a week ago, but this time I moved normally, just like my boss.

“I slowed down time in this pocket of reality so we could talk. To everyone else listening or looking in, they will only see us sitting here. We can speak freely, and I can give you your reward,” Samhain said with a dark tone.

A branch-like hand reached over and grabbed the bottle. He poured into each glass until they were full. He put the bottle down and he picked up his glass. I picked my glass up and we clinked them together before taking a deep drink.

Glasses down on the table, Samhain's eyes dimmed as he looked at me. "Mr. Ferryman, I informed you that if you completed this assignment, I would have a reward for you. Contrary to popular belief, I don't need to grant you more power. Instead, I've come to tell you a truth you've needed to hear for a long time."

"Does this have anything to do with Draygon and some plan he has for me?" I asked.

Samhain nodded. "It does, but it is much deeper than that. I must start at the beginning, so you may understand.

"Over twenty years ago, there was a couple who dreamed of bigger things. They were ambitious and were willing to do anything to achieve their goals. They made a deal with a certain god of illusions and death. In turn, he granted them power. They went on to commit great crimes and murder many people in their wake."

"Are you talking about my parents?" I asked with a soft tone.

"I will get to that part. Please hear me as I continue," Samhain said with an understanding tone.

"This couple was deeply in love and wanted to change their fortunes. They had you and decided to scale back their heists to raise you, but their needs pushed at them to occasionally take on a heist here and there to make sure ends were met.

"They did well for themselves until a heist went bad. Your father was killed, and your mother escaped. She was so distraught; she made a new deal with Draygon. She promised your soul to Draygon, in return, she could go to the underworld to search for her lost love."

Something stabbed at my heart as I listened intently.

Samhain lowered his large head. "As I said when we first met, gods are powerful, but not omnipotent. I felt your father's soul enter

the underworld. Most souls go directly to the soul wheel, but those who are entangled with deities are sometimes sent to the underworld or the plains of paradise to be rewarded or punished. Your father was going to be punished for many years before he could go to the soul wheel.

“I sensed his soul and I sensed your mother’s deal. Draygon agreed to help your mother by cursing your soul to serve him. Your mother went into the underworld and despite my witch angels and other powerful entities, nothing could stop her from saving him. She pulled him from the underworld and Draygon reformed his body. I believe this was during the time shortly before they left you without a word.

“From what I could gather, your death would trigger the curse and a new contract. I may be ancient, but I could not see an innocent soul be cursed to do evil. You led a solitary life, despite your parents taking care of you. They knew what they were doing, and their selfish desires were directly affecting your soul. So, when you died, I snatched you from Draygon’s claws and blessed you to become one of my witch angels. It was the only way I could purge your darkness, by allowing you do enough good deeds to break the contract and free you from the curse.”

I sat back and blinked. “Let me guess, it will take about three hundred years to break the curse.”

Samhain nodded. “My blessing will eat away at the curse, but it will take time. I stationed you here so you would have the added protection of the hotel and give you something to do. Nyx has no knowledge of this, but considering her past, it was a perfect match to keep you both together.”

I picked up my drink and chugged the rest of it. When I placed it back on the table, I looked at Samhain with dark eyes.

“Who were my parents?” I asked with an even tone.

Samhain nodded. “Iron Skull and Lady Decay.”

My heart stopped and didn't continue to beat. Iron Skull and Lady Decay were supervillains, big time supervillains. I heard about them growing up, but I had no idea my parents were them. They had business trips from time to time, but for the most part, they did stay home and take care of me.

I let out a long exhale. Iron Skull was super strong and powerful. Lady Decay had the power of death and reanimation. They killed people, but most of the time, they were simply robbing banks or installations with new tech. They were wheelers and dealers in the crime underworld from what I read about them. Everyone knew Iron Skull and Lady Decay and when they disappeared from the spotlight, little did I know, they were fucking raising me.

"I can sense your pain and for that, I am sorry. I knew I would have to tell you soon, but I had to be sure you were following the path of justice. Taking down a knightmare and ensuring the Eye of Thull was off the board proved you are not your parent's son. Knowing that, I had to tell you at once."

I sat as Samhain slowly stood up. He looked down on me with knowing eyes.

"Mr. Ferryman, I know this is difficult news, but you did well. I want you to know, there are many good warriors, beings of light, and witch angels that will come to your aid if you need it. For now, learn how to use your power and continue doing what's right. The greater the good deeds, the more my power will eat away at your curse."

I looked up. "What kind of curse did Draygon put on me?"

Samhain simply looked at me. "I don't know. I can sense the curse, but I cannot decipher it. With time, we both may come to understand what the dark god wanted with your soul."

"What happens now?" I asked.

Samhain smiled. "You will continue with your duties. I will take the Abomination Girls to a private realm where they can be rehabilitated to help the side of harmony, as per our agreement.

“As for all of us, we will continue to fight the good fight and further understand our enemies’ designs.”

Time snapped back to normal. Samhain walked toward the main lobby while waving a hand to me.

“We will speak more in the future. Meanwhile, enjoy a little rest.”

I was up from my seat and following. I stepped to the archway as Samhain moved among the group of people gathered. Lynn, Nora, and Amber stepped from the crowd and stood before Samhain with their heads bowed.

“Time to go,” Samhain smiled.

Lynn lifted her head and looked at the god with wide eyes. “May I have a chance to say goodbye to Brandon?”

Samhain eyed the Abomination Girl and gave a simple nod.

Lynn crossed the distance and hugged me with her lips close to my ear. “I knew you looked familiar. You’re Iron Skull and Lady Decay’s kid. You’re all grown up now. Don’t worry, me and the girls won’t say anything, but when we come back, we will have a lot to talk about. But first, I have something for you.”

I felt Lynn’s hand push something into my inside leather jacket pocket.

“Keep the pages safe. They belong to a book called the Canticum Mortuum, the Song of the Dead. If Draygon reforms the ancient book, it will be like having a nuke that could destroy this realm. Keep them safe.”

Before I could retort, she kissed me before pulling away.

“Ready to go, Pumpkin Daddy,” Lynn smiled.

Samhain rubbed the side of his head, “Don’t call me that.”

“Pumpkin pie?” Lynn laughed with Nora and Amber snickering.

“Time to go,” Samhain said with a tired edge before waving his hand.

A portal appeared around the four of them. Lynn, Amber, and Nora waved to me before they were swallowed up by the portal and they were gone.

I stood by the archway, the knowledge of my past and my parents sinking deeper into my psyche. Nyx, Lydia, Vanessa, and Mara approached me.

“Bran?” Nyx asked with concerned eyes.

My eyes lit up and I smiled. “I’m good. We still have a few hours before dawn. How about we celebrate our victory!” I shouted as I moved to the jukebox and turned up the volume.

Cheers filled the lobby as bottles appeared and drinks were poured.

I smiled as Nyx sauntered to me and rested her arms on my shoulders. “I know you're hurting. What happened?”

“We can talk about it later. For now, I just want to forget for a little while.”

Vanessa moved closer to me and Nyx and stared at me with loving eyes. Nyx glanced at the banshee and then back to me.

“We’ll help you forget everything tonight,” Nyx winked.

“We promise,” Vanessa smiled.

I nodded and smiled wider. “Let’s do this! Burritos and drinks for everyone!”

Cheers filled the lobby again.

Despite the victory, my spirit felt low. It’s not every night you discover your parents are supervillains who sold your soul to a dark god, and you are fighting evil to save your soul. I could go on and on about my past, but tonight was meant for living.

A drink was put in my hand, and I looked over to Aithen standing here with a smile.

“Mr. Ferryman, thank you for your hospitality,” the angel grinned from ear to ear.

“Thank you for staying with us,” I smiled.

“That is something I wanted to talk to you about. You did a marvelous job of helping at the training seminar. I feel I have a lot to learn about many things about many realms. That is why I am offering my services to be your new bartender for the Sanctuary Bar.”

“Uh,” was all I could say before Aithen continued.

“You don’t have to thank me. I feel I can learn a lot more here at the hotel. With the varied people that walk through here, I’m sure I can learn a lot. Please, no need to worry. You don’t have to pay me. I’ll do it for free! I’m happy to be on the team!” Aithen grinned.

“Uh,” I said again before Nyx and Vanessa pulled me into the sudden dancefloor that was the lobby.

“Let’s shake it out before we shake it out,” Nyx said with a seductive wink.

I had to agree. There was plenty of time to worry about everything tomorrow. Tonight, belonged to the dead and the living as we partied the night away.

Thoughts stabbed into me of my parents, but I pushed them away. Everyone was going to have a lot of explaining to do, once I found them. For now, it was time to get drunk and make bad decisions. After all, I was a hotel manager, not a cub scout.

“Welcome to the dead man’s party!” I shouted and everyone cheered.

Sixteen

The Merchant Cometh

The morning sun cast a glow across the clear sky. A dark hotel stood as a cold wind flowed over the landscape. Leaves rustled in the breeze as a car pulled up to the hotel.

A car door opened, and a thin woman stepped out. She flicked two soul pennies to the demon driver. He caught them and nodded to her. The woman closed the door shut and the car drove off.

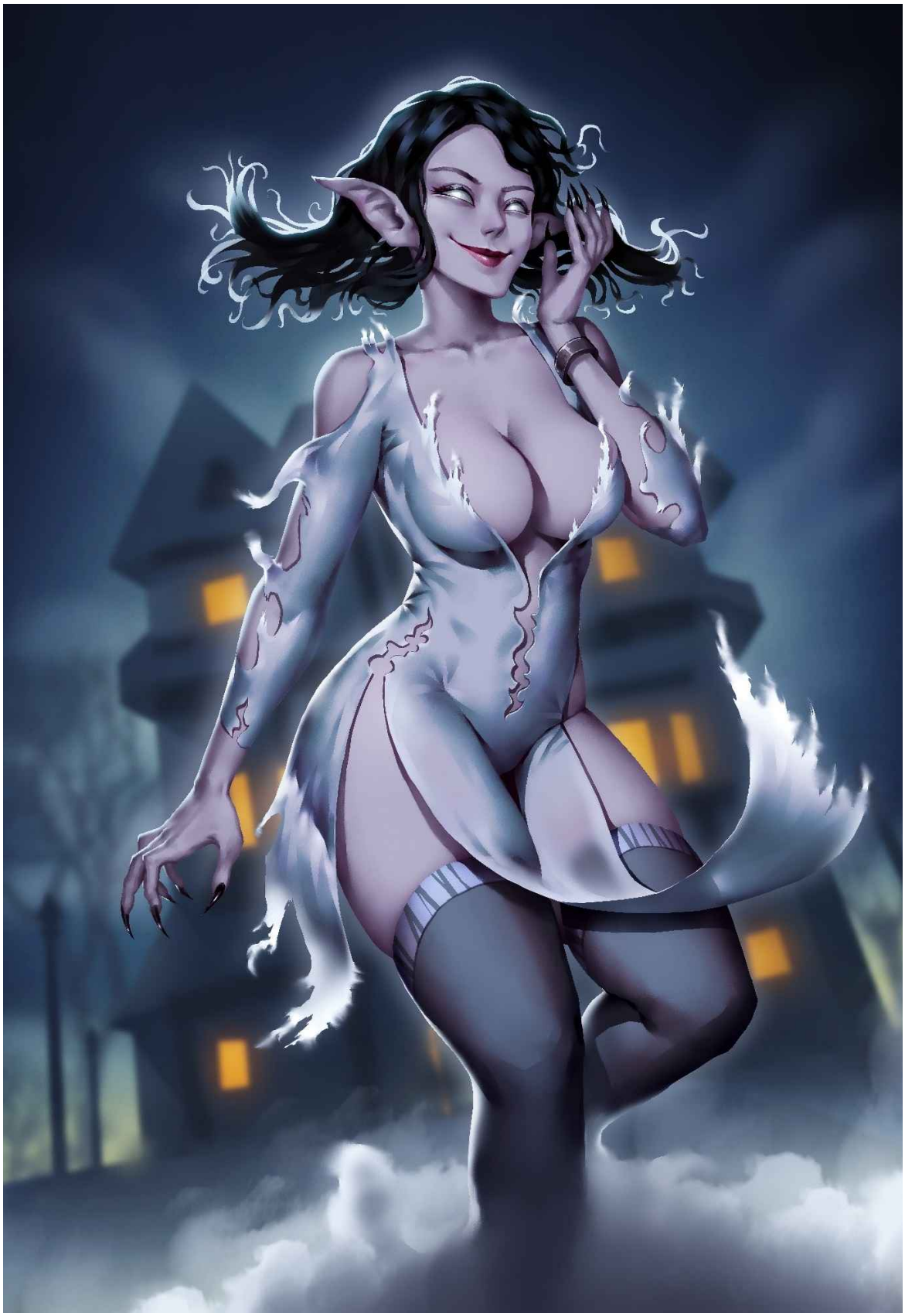
Lora stood before the Coffin Hotel with a strangely excited gleam in her eyes. She had a briefcase in hand and a backpack slung over her shoulder. The merchant continued to stare as she remembered the hotel manager's words play back in her mind, telling her that he would allow her to have a shop here at the hotel.

For the first time in a long time, Lora would have a home. Moving between realms could be a harrowing task, but you go where the money is. Unlike many other merchants she knew in the field, they would continue to move like nomads across realms, but Lora would have a long-term shop in one of the most protected places on Urth.

"Well Mr. Ferryman, let's see how true to your word you really are," Lora whispered to herself before her lips formed a wicked smile.

The thin woman walked to the stairs and took each one up as she daydreamed of enough profit to change the world.

~The End~



Dedications

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Thank you for reading!

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Paul Bellow
Mike Truk
M Damon Baker

Bonnie Price
Austin Beck
Marcus Sloss
D. Levesque
Bruce Sentar
Jack Porter
Neil Bimbeau
Eden Redd

If I forgot anyone, let me know and I'll include you in the next book!

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